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Special Issue: *The Arts in the classroom: Advocacy, theory and practice*

An introduction to the third special issue in our special series: **The Arts in the classroom: Advocacy, theory and practice**

Kerry Earl Rinehart

Special Issue Editors: *Millie Locke, Robyn Ewing and Terry Locke*

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It gives me great pleasure to introduce the third Special Issue in our series, *Promoting a broad curriculum*:

THE ARTS IN THE CLASSROOM: ADVOCACY, THEORY AND PRACTICE

Edited by Millie Locke, Robyn Ewing & Terry Locke

“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.”
~ John Dewey (1916, p. 239)

Due to a purposeful and directed undercutting of the value of Arts-oriented Education and an acceleration of results-based expectations to meet objectives within the hustle culture of many Western national societies economies over the last 40 years, teachers require advice and support to reintroduce an Arts oriented education. Engaging in art practices, as engaging in learning practices, is a vital premise of not only a well-lived, but also a fundamental, life. To quote artist and art educator Graham Price:

We have got[ten] a profession that has now ... no art advisors or sustained professional development. There has been a major devaluing of pre-service experiences in specialist fields of knowledge. Over the last 40 years we have decreased the opportunities for teachers to learn in art, and probably in a lot of other fields as well. We have become impatient teachers for ready-made online resources. Even experienced teachers scan resources from the point of view, ‘Oh, I like that. I could get my kids to make one of those’. So they are starting from the premise that art is about the ability to replicate a model, to carry out instructions, to get ‘one of those’. Art in this time-pressured strategy is not an active way of engaging in the world in visual terms. They are not teaching how to see, how to imagine, how to control the media that kids are working with. They are giving them a few one-off experiences. So you might hear it said, ‘Oh, the kids will get bored if we do painting for a whole term.’ So what is going to drive your art programme? It has got to be the desire to say something. You will get better at using the media, if you get repeat opportunities. If it is a one-off, you are going to get a one-off response with no development in perception or material skill. (Price & Earl, 2017, p. 106)

Price's points about the state of Arts Education provide some of the grist that justify the need for, at the least, two special issues on the Arts within this special series.

The overarching aim for this special series is to provide teachers and school leaders with accessible material to support teaching and learning across the breadth of Aotearoa New Zealand curriculum subject areas. In other words, to “promote a broad curriculum”. We seek through issues in this series to rekindle the spark of teachers’ enthusiasm, knowledge, skills and practice in teaching of curriculum subjects beyond literacy and mathematics.

In many parts of the world, the time school children spend engaged with the Arts has been systematically trimmed over years in favour of achieving standards in basic skills, employment ready skills, and assessment preparation. For example—alarmingly—in many states of the United States of America (USA), aspects of the curriculum, as well as teachers, are being cut and/or silenced. Teachers in the USA are being fired for teaching using the “wrong” books, books on subjects like the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington or LBGTQ+ writers. Paul Thomas (2021) writes, “Parents, political activists, and politicians are impacting who teaches and what is being taught in the context of *a historical and current demand that teachers themselves remain apolitical, both in their classrooms and their lives beyond school*” (emphasis in the original. para., 8). Thomas is referring to

Corresponding author:

Kerry Earl Rinehart kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz

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the power of local curriculum but not in a good way, in a way that sees bias and emotion trump critical thinking and reducing open and candid reasoning and research-based decision-making.

We must value teachers and ensure that teachers value themselves. Teaching is more than connecting young people with great ideas and opportunities for learning. To sustain student ownership of learning, educators may have begun to believe they need to keep out of the way. Teachers may be asked to step back and may step too far back into the sidelines (Earl Rinehart, 2020). Biesta (2012b) writes that he is “motivated by a very concrete and practical concern about the disappearance of teaching and the demise of the role of the teacher as someone who has something to say and something to bring” (p. 458). He argues that “if teaching is to have a meaning beyond the facilitation of learning, if it is *essential* rather than *accidental* to learning, then it has to come with a notion of ‘transcendence’. It has to be understood as something that comes from the outside and brings something radically new” (p. 456, emphasis in original). In another piece, Biesta put it this way: teaching is not about “the repetition of what is already there but about bringing something new—and perhaps it is important to say: something radically new—to the situation” (Biesta, 2012a, p. 41). Teachers need to be valued for who they are, what they say in teaching and learning, and what knowledges they bring. Additionally, educators can recognise, value and pay attention to the ways teachers shape and influence parent, whānau (extended family) and community understandings of education, schooling and curriculum.

The “narrowing of curriculum” (Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Jerald, 2006; Manzo, 2005; Meyer, 2005) describes the outcomes that increased standardisation and high stakes accountability have on what is taught and learned in schools. The narrowing of the curriculum particularly refers to the erosion of time spent on other school subjects (e.g., physical education, science, social studies, and the arts) due to increased time and attention on literacy (reading and writing) and mathematics. Putting aside systemic socio-economic contexts and broader government policy issues, such as external pressures on educators, Jerald (2006) pointed to teachers and school leaders’ decision-making:

[E]ducators should be made aware that cutting too deeply into social studies, science, and the arts imposes significant long-term costs on students, hampers reading comprehension and thinking skills, increases inequity, and makes the job of secondary level teachers that much harder. (p. 5)

A narrowing of the curriculum is just one of the harms of education reforms based on the use of generic standards across schools and communities along with high stakes accountability for the educational progress and achievement of children. Such reforms have already been clearly signaled as harmful in education contexts such as the United States and the United Kingdom (see for example, Berliner, 2009; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Manzo, 2005; Nichols & Berliner, 2007), for both process- and results-oriented educations. Harms identified in research also include: limiting local curriculum initiatives, limiting learning for learners from poorer families, increased assessment, increased workload for teachers and students (and making it more like work than learning), undermining the expertise and professional judgment of teachers, negatively shaping teacher practice and impacting on teacher-student relationships, and impacting on school policy and public relations through school performance reporting and public records.

Standards and accountability assessments go together and, of particular concern, are mandated, standardised, commercially produced assessments, such as those used in the United States and the United Kingdom. Wiliam (2003) questions the design of such assessments and the curricular decisions made based on test results. One of his concerns revolves around the way commercially-made tests undermine the expert knowledge of teachers:

The failure to use the detailed knowledge that teachers have about their students impoverishes the quality of the summative assessment (and, in particular, makes it less reliable and diminishes validity). In other words, while teachers may not demand to be involved in summative assessment, good summative assessment demands the involvement of teachers. (Wiliam, 2003, p. 132)

Although New Zealand's National Standards policy (2010–2017) did not involve a required national test, the impact of the enactment of these standards demonstrated much of the concerns that had been predicted. Thrupp and White found that during that period:

National Standards are having some favourable impacts in areas that include teacher understanding of curriculum levels, motivation of some teachers and children and some improved targeting of interventions. Nevertheless, such gains are overshadowed by damage being done through the intensification of staff workloads, curriculum narrowing and the reinforcement of a two-tier curriculum, the positioning and labelling of children and unproductive new tensions amongst school staff. These problems are often occurring despite attempts by schools and teachers to minimise any damaging impact of the National Standards. (2013, p. i)

In an Ipu Kererū blog, Thrupp (2017) recognised this policy's effects had become naturalised and, for the most part, especially if teacher education qualification programmes do not provide bigger picture, theoretical and alternative perspectives, unquestioned by new teachers.

Even though most teachers and principals did not like the impact of the National Standards policy, after a decade of its influence New Zealand primary schools are now marinated in the thinking, language, and expectations of the National Standards. This has also had wider impacts, for instance on early childhood education. It will all take a little while to undo.

It's great, though, that New Zealand primary schools will now be able to spend less time shoring up judgements about children – judgements that have often been pointless or harmful – and instead spend more time making learning relevant and interesting for each child. Removing National Standards should also allow teachers to be less burdened, contributing to making teaching a more attractive career again.

In light of these insights into the negative effects of National Standards implementation, the Editor, Editorial Board and the Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research (WMIER) are pleased to publish a series of special issues of *Teachers and Curriculum* titled *Promoting a Broad Curriculum* with the aim of promoting the “other” curriculum subjects, while at the same time providing useful professional learning for school leaders and teachers to continue to restore the richness of a broad curriculum and the pleasure of learning and teaching.

Price (in Price & Earl, 2017) cited what he viewed as “a classic art education quote from artist-teacher Robert Irwin: ‘Give the student what they want to learn, and then prove to them that it is not enough’” (p. 103). Building on learners' interests, providing *act-ivities* that elicit enjoyment and positive feelings, and having a nice wall display may be typical drivers for arts programmes in many classrooms; however, learning about, in and through the Arts can be so much more. Teaching the arts can take learners' curiosity, imagination, creativity, identity and commun(e)-ication beyond the immediate hour and local situations, beyond curriculum learning objectives and comparisons with models and exemplars into personal expression and memory, into “becoming”, “more” and “bigger than” spaces.

The final word goes to the editors of this special issue, Millie Locke, Robyn Ewing and Terry Locke: “The need for arts education advocacy never goes away, but the most powerful argument for the Arts lies in beacons of good practice.” (p. 6)

Remember to check out the previous issues in this series:

Quality STEM Education

Edited by Elizabeth Reinsfield, Chris Eames and Wendy Fox-Turnbull.

The Arts will find a way: Breaking through and moving forward

Edited by Claire Coleman and Bronya Dean.

If you would like to edit a special issue in this series, please contact me or access guidance on the journal website (wje.org.nz/index.php/WJE/about).

Kerry Earl Rinehart
Special Series Editor

Email: kerry.earlrinehart@waikato.ac.nz

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