

LITERACY: a focus on the arts

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More often than not when we use the term literacy we tend to think of reading, writing, grammar and spelling. Yet, we should not stop there. We need to expand the definition of what literacy means. Students read and interpret not just words on a page but also icons on a computer screen, images on TV, graphs and charts in newspapers and magazines. These different kinds of literacies need to be incorporated into classroom/school experiences.

“A comprehensive, high-quality education that gives every student the arts literacy advantage by developing his/her skills in the four “Cs” – communication, culture, cognition and creativity”



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In this brief article I would like to focus on arts education and emphasise that by learning in and through the arts is essential to developing skills for our complex society. Hopefully it will encourage others to reflect on the matter and enter this debate.

Tomorrow's world will demand a quick mind. Focus. Discipline. Imagination. Grasp of the big picture. Attention to detail. Teamwork. How can we educate our children to thrive in such a world? Through the arts is one of the answers.

Tomorrow's workforce will need broad abilities which go beyond the technical. There will be a demand for people who are creative, analytical, disciplined and self-confident, people who can solve problems, communicate ideas, and be sensitive to the world around them. Hands-on participation in the arts is a proven way to help develop these abilities.

And what are young people learning when they learn the arts? Definitely they are using their minds in verbal and nonverbal ways. They communicate complex ideas in a variety of forms. They understand what someone else is trying to tell them in words, sounds or images. They imagine and explore new possibilities and work hard at making them happen. The arts also helps one to appreciate quality.

Making the case for arts literacy is only the means to a more important end, however. Providing a comprehensive, high-quality education that gives every student the arts literacy advantage by developing his/her skills in the four “Cs” – communication, culture, cognition and creativity – should be our aim.

This is not a goal that can be met through after-school programmes or even private lessons, valuable as these learning opportunities may be. Our schools must educate children to be fully literate, which in the 21st century will clearly include arts-derived knowledge. So, in the best of all possible worlds, every school would provide education in the arts in the same way that it provides education in reading and writing (and numeracy).

This is not to say that this is not happening

in our schools. I am sure that one does come across varied examples of the arts (Creative / Performing) taking place in the schools. Any developments that we may embark on should take into consideration such examples. However, I do believe that a national study should be first and foremost undertaken to assess the state of Arts Education in Malta, at the same time reflect the proposals of the National Curriculum in this regard and propose a framework and way forward for arts education.

Here it will suffice to mention that the Draft National Curriculum (March 1998) suggests that students ought to be engaged in arts learning for at least two lessons per week (i.e. 11/2 hours per week) of their time in school. This, unfortunately, goes down to one lesson per week in the upper forms – Form 3 to Form 5. There is no mention of what activities will take place at primary level. However, I'm confident that the final version of the National Curriculum will cater for this important dimension in a person's development.

This leads us to ask a series of questions which determine the eventual success or failure of any such programme. The following are but some of the questions that we may wish to address. Does our Education Division provide sufficient leadership for the arts programme? Do our school heads see the arts as a core school subject? Do we have strong arts teachers who continue to practice their art inside and outside the school? Are our community arts and cultural organisations actively present in the schools, including the use of school performing arts venues?

The following questions can be addressed at the school level:

- How much time each day and each week are children taught the arts?
- Are teachers trained in the arts?
- Do schools have curriculum and supplies for arts classes?
- Do other teachers work with arts specialists to plan joint lessons for students?
- Does the school have a policy for the Creative and Performing Arts as for other subjects?

For the first question, there is no one correct answer, but arts educators generally believe that if the arts are part of the core curriculum for pupils in the primary years, then pupils ought to be engaged in arts learning for at least 15% of their time in school. If you can answer yes to the remaining questions than you are on the right track and that your perseverance is paying dividends. If not, then you will need to insist on arts education and participate to make it thrive.