

# The Arts and Irish Education: Some Lessons from the USA

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## *The Arts and Education: An American Context*

I first came across the work of Shirley Brice Heath through my reading about the *Champions of Change: the Impact of the Arts on Learning* (Fiske, 1999) initiative in the USA, which explored how and why young people are changed through their arts experiences. The researchers on this project, all eminent scholars and experts in various arts fields, were invited to examine well-established models of arts education. They were then asked to look beyond specific programmes to larger issues of the arts in American education. What was of particular interest in the research was that out-of-school settings were also included in an effort to "better understand the impact of the arts on learning, not just on formal education" (Fiske, 1999:ix). Though they were working independently, the findings of the *Champions of Change* researchers have a striking consensus, which is summed up in the introductory pages of the report as follows:

- The arts reach students who are not otherwise being reached
- The arts reach students in ways they are not otherwise being reached
- The arts connect students to themselves and each other
- The arts transform the environment for learning
- The arts provide learning opportunities for the adults in the lives of young people
- The arts provide new challenges for those students already considered successful
- The arts connect learning experiences to the world of real work

The work of Professor Heath will speak for itself in this issue [*Youth Drama Ireland*, 2004], exploring the implications of these positive and welcome findings in a variety of contexts. Aware of the community-based nature of her work in this and other projects, we can substitute the words "young people" for students above. In the *Champions of Change* project, Prof. Heath (Fiske, 1999:20-34) looked specifically at "Learning in the Arts during Non-school Hours" and concluded that:

*Community organisations that work effectively with youth successfully fill the "institutional gap" by providing young people with substantial learning and practice opportunities with adult professionals and older youth who serve as teachers and models (33)*

She could not sum up better the work and function of the National Association for Youth Drama (NAYD). But we cannot be forever filling the "institutional gap". It is time the arts and arts organisations were given their rightful place and appropriate status and funding. In the Irish context, we need people like Professor Heath to get this message across; hers is the critical and independent voice that speaks volumes.\* But what do we need to know about this Irish context to ground Professor Heath's work?

## *The Arts and Education: The Irish Context*

In 2001, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD) presented the report of its subcommittee on the Arts and Culture (Fo-choiste Ealaíne agus Cultúra) to its annual conference in Galway. Entitled *The Arts in our Schools* (2001) the report makes for interesting reading and includes a historical overview on "The Neglect of the Arts in Second-Level Schools" (2001: 11-15). In summarising the key points below, it will become clear why in 2004 we need a champion of change, a critical voice.

In 1979, Ciarán Benson opened his report on *The Place of the Arts in Irish Education* with the stark comment: "The Arts have been neglected in Irish Education". Martin Drury, his successor as Education Officer at the Arts Council, was to reiterate that statement in 1985: "The acknowledged neglect of the arts in education continues". Also in 1985, the Curriculum and Examinations Board spoke of "the indefensible neglect of arts education" in its discussion paper *The Arts in Education*. The working party of this insightful and visionary board made 47 recommendations that would have changed the role and profile of the arts and the arts education in this country. Unfortunately, such recommendations as an overall plan for the development of the arts in education, a review of the education of teachers to take account of the arts, more favourable attitudes towards the arts in education, were to die with the Curriculum and Examinations Board itself. In 1992, while expressing an aspiration that the education system would foster personal and social development, the Green Paper *Education for a Changing World*, did not envisage a role of any significance for the arts. Culture was prescribed in terms of enterprise, education in terms of "working for life... for European Citizenship". The arts were not even marginalised in this list. Though in the section on second level education there is a reference to the arts, the extent of the commitment to the arts is hard to gauge in its statement "that students are exposed to subjects such as Art and Music, that would develop their expressive abilities". I for one am still left with some questions: Does 'exposure' imply immersion in and commitment to the arts? Is art no more than a form of self-expression? Where is Drama in this curriculum?

The National Education convention, held in October 1993, addressed the unbalanced view of the arts expressed in *Education for a Changing World*. There was "a general commitment to a balanced holistic curriculum at second level". Both in response to the Green Paper and at the convention, a variety of agencies argued cogently for the centrality of education in the arts. The Minister for Education recognised this when she remarked in her closing address "the widespread concern we have heard for the place of the arts in education provides us with an agenda for action in this area". The White Paper, *Charting our Education Future*, marked a significant improvement in the standing of the arts. In relation to the primary curriculum, it stated that "the Government affirms the centrality of the arts within educational policy and provision, particularly during compulsory schooling". It was also envisaged that second level schooling would provide for experience in arts activities:

*The provision of arts education is an issue of social equality and there is an increasing recognition that cultural poverty is a significant part of*

*disadvantage. The creative and performing arts have an important role as part of the whole school curriculum. They can be a key contributor to the school ethos and to its place in the local community* We can only agree with these sentiments, but since the Education Act of 1998 does not concern itself with the arts in education, they are not legislated for. I am left with some more unsettling questions: Is the commitment of our government then only rhetorical? Why is it that when cutbacks have to be made the Arts are first to suffer? How can we address cultural poverty if, for example, our Theatre in Education companies cannot afford to run programmes in our schools because their funding has been cut?

There have been occasions, of course, when the government has achieved much: Take the Breaking the Cycle initiative which responded so well to the 1995 Department of Education and Combat Poverty Agency Report *Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*. Under the direction of its co-ordinator Maura Grant, this initiative did much to combat educational disadvantage by building on and celebrating the arts. In *A Celebration of Learning through the Arts*, it provided us with new ways of linking the school and the community. It showed what the Department of Education and Science could do when it has personnel with vision at the helm. One need only look at the work here in University College Cork of the *Bridging the Gap* project, under the inspired directorship of Aine Hyland, Professor of Education and Vice President of UCC and the creative management of Dr Tracey Connolly to see how the arts and learning can thrive in schools and address the wrongs of disadvantage when financial, pedagogical and institutional support come together. This project is aimed at enhancing the educational experience of young people from 42 schools and centres in Cork City. It extends the community mission of UCC and is funded jointly by the Department of Education and Science and by private funding obtained by UCC. However, the NAPD is right: We need "a properly structured and integrated arts education" for our young people at the heart of the education system. We cannot rely only on the good will of funders and patrons and the ingenuity of project leaders who see the value of the arts in addressing educational needs:

*Let's not get totally enmeshed in the agenda of the points system. We must make time in the curriculum for all arts forms. We must bring art and the artist into the classroom. If we don't make this an absolute priority we are moving towards a cultural wasteland (NAPD, 2001: 2)* The NAPD report indicates that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) which replaced the CEB, has been insistent that provision be made for arts education and has endeavoured to envisage a curriculum which encompasses more than examination courses. It proposes that arts education be extended into Senior Cycle. A modular construction of courses is to be developed to allow for diversity of experience. *The Programme for Reform* (1993) states that emphasis would be on both the creative and the appreciative elements of art and that the arts would be treated on the basis of accessibility for all. But the NCCA is not the DES (The Department of Education and Science) and its advice may not be taken on board. Again some unsettling questions surface for me: Ten years later has any of this happened? Why is the drama syllabus for second level still sitting on some

obscure shelf? Why has there been no in-service as yet for the Drama Curriculum at primary level? Since the teachers are working on the new primary curriculum for the past five years, what kind of a message is given when drama as the new subject on the syllabus is ignored during this time? Is money to be the only consideration when the real wealth of the country's youth - its educational health - is at stake? Certainly we need another champion of change, but is it fair that our individual researchers, visionaries, patrons, teachers and artists should put themselves on the line when the system does not really change?\*

### *Unearthing Misconceptions about the Arts: introducing Harvard's Project Zero*

Prof. Heath's work will do much to push us towards examining our assumptions and misconceptions re the arts and their place in the school and the community. Since I came to her work through that of *Project Zero* at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Steve Seidel being one of the researchers on the project and also director of the Project Zero Summer Institutes, I will return to that world in the hope of throwing some light on our misconceptions re the arts and their educative role. Project Zero was founded in 1967 by the philosopher Nelson Goodman to study and improve education in the arts. He believed that arts learning should be studied as a serious cognitive activity and that close to "zero" had been established about the field, hence the project name. (Veenema et al, 1999: 7). One of his central questions about art, also insightfully reiterated by Benson (1978) in his report on the *Place of the Arts in Irish Education*, should still give direction to our work today: The question is not *what* is art, but *when* is art? If there is little or no attempt to involve young people in the arts and to provide them with the necessary pedagogical, cultural, artistic, social, financial and institutional support that any of the arts need, are our young people experiencing art at all? The 'what' question can be prescriptive and alienating and does nothing to highlight the cultural, social and personal underpinnings that make art and any of its forms real for the creator or receiver of the art. It is the 'when' question that points to making connections and to engagement, ownership and empowerment, but these are not possible without support on so many levels. Much of the work at *Project Zero* is founded on the principle that the arts are cognitive and that they afford distinct ways of coming to know the world. The arts are seen as providing powerful ways of making meaning and of educating keen ears and eyes, creative minds and hands. The arts also resonate in contemporary theories of teaching and learning within *Project Zero*. Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences, for example, dismisses the idea of intelligence as a unitary capacity and proposes that all of us have at least eight intelligences at our disposal. It highlights the fact that people learn in different ways, hence in this context, the arts become legitimate ways of knowing. In defining intelligence (1999) as "a bio-psychological potential to process information, that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create produces that are of value in a culture", Gardner has given arts education and learning its rightful place. In placing 'solving' and 'creating' side by side in his definition, Gardner has eliminated the distinction between intelligence and talent. From a stereotypical perspective, the artist was seen

as talented, but not intelligent! Gardner, however, does not prioritise the linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences. For so long these have been the preserve of the traditional, academic world manifest in our Leaving Certificate and in the machinations of the Point System. Gardner's theory gives equal status to the musical, bodily kinaesthetic, visual-spatial and personal intelligences, which are also essential in our coming to know and understand and create and, hence, in our holistic development. By providing diverse opportunities for learning, the arts can expand student development beyond the mathematical logical and linguistic intelligences usually prioritised in school settings. Working with the arts elicits deep rather than superficial engagement of the other intelligences. Because high level thinking is inherent in the arts, a classroom enriched with the arts offers enhanced opportunities to develop habits of mind essential to good thinking (Tishman and Wise, 1999). In contextualising the work of Prof. Heath, it is also important to bear in mind some of the lessons of another report on the arts from the USA: the *REAP* (Reviewing Education and the Arts Project) report of 2000. In that year, the Getty trust joined with Harvard's Project Zero to convene a conference entitled "Beyond the Soundbite: What the Research Actually Shows about Arts Education and Academic Outcomes". Winner and Hetland, the editors of the report, caution us against relying on instrumental arguments to bolster our case for the arts: To claim, for example, that the arts buttress the 3 R's is a double edged sword, for the arts will then lose their position if academic improvement is not proven. Winner (2000: 17-31) found that some studies explored in the meta-analytic approach to the project "do find a causal link between arts and academic outcomes, but others do not" (24). In advocating for the arts, we need to distinguish between core justifications for teaching and supporting the arts, versus bonus justifications.

*Core justifications are the central reasons: they are about learning in the disciplines of the arts themselves. Bonus reasons are the side effects: enhances learning in non-arts disciplines, which may or may not occur. The two most important reasons for studying the arts are to enable our children to be able to appreciate some of the greatest feats humans have ever achieved and to give our children sufficient skill in an art form so that they can express themselves in this art form. The arts are the chief scholarly domains in which deep personal meanings can be recognised and expressed, often in non-verbal form. (28)*

In drawing the study together, Winner and Hetland (147) do much to point the way and to help redirect and reframe the case of the arts and education:

*The arts are not just handmaidens to other disciplines (though they may be vehicles that enhance learning in other subjects). Nor are they merely models of self-expression (though they are that), nor just entertainment (though they are that as well). Instead, the arts are serious modes of inquiry and discovery in their own rights and they are based on symbol systems no less complex, and no more transparent, than the symbol systems of mathematics and language.*

## ***The Arts as a Building Block***

Returning to the work of Shirley Brice Heath, and coming full circle to the latest report on the arts in an Irish context: the *Report on the Arts as a Building Block* (2003), it is interesting to note that the latter relies totally on the work of Heath and others in America to revisit the role of the arts in Irish education and society. One can only agree with Cecilia Keaveney T.D, chair of the committee, that there is little point in reinventing the wheel when we have such far-reaching studies on the arts and learning to hand. We have much to learn from them, our challenge now is to make our own of them. The report concludes that "the arts should be considered a fundamental building block for further advancement, not an expendable leisure-time activity". Prof. Heath's work has done much to show how arts organisations, particularly those that look to young people to support and sustain the group artistically as well as organisationally, are indeed a fundamental building block. She has done much to show how we can make learning work (indeed that is the title of one of her papers) in the wider community. She shows how we can marry social enterprise and organisational learning with learning in the arts. As an anthropologist, she is well placed to see the bigger picture and to show how the worlds of business and of the arts can come together for the mutual benefit of both. In this age of cutbacks, we have much to learn here, for there are other ways of working so that the arts do not suffer once again. We may need to find ways of bridging the "institutional gap" but we also need to demand that the institutions responsible take that duty seriously. They have to become the cornerstone if the foundation of the arts is to be rock solid. With Professor Shirley Brice Heath's help to scaffold the building, let's hope that we make it to the top this time.

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