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## **Testing Times for the Arts**

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### **Abstract**

This article draws on recent research that sought to find substantive evidence that participation in quality Arts experiences can enhance students' academic motivation, engagement and achievement (Martin, Mansour, Anderson, Gibson, Liem & Sudmalis, 2013). Here we examine "dispositions" (Perkins, Jay & Tishman, 1993) that comprise high-quality critical and creative thinking in Arts classrooms. In doing so, we find many similarities between our research and that of Eisner's (2002) contentions in *The arts and the creation of mind*. While Eisner (2002) continually argued that the Arts teach flexibility, learning to attend to relationships, expression, the ability to shift direction and imagination, we also found that quality Arts participation affords students opportunities to play with ideas and actions, to establish collaborative relationships with peers and teacher and move in and out of unknown spaces. These

“untestable” skills align to the creative, flexible, resilient and forward-thinking citizens so prized by governments and private sectors worldwide (Florida, 2002). We argue that the kinds of thinking and knowing developed in the Arts are important in and of themselves not in terms of the benefits they offer other areas of the curriculum.

**Keywords**

Arts education, Creativity, Teaching frameworks, Arts classrooms

## **Introduction**

Arts education in many Western countries finds itself in a tenuous situation (Burnard & White, 2008). The Arts promote creativity, self-expression and imagination which some maintain are frivolous “extras” in an already over-crowded curriculum (Gibson & Ewing, 2011). This situation has been exacerbated in Australia by the current focus on high-stakes testing such as NaPLAN (the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) and the introduction of the MySchool website.<sup>1</sup> National, standardised tests in literacy and numeracy but not the Arts (even though the Arts have been included as part of the new national curriculum) has resulted in less arts in many Australian schools (Ewing, 2010; Gibson, 2012).

## **Current arts curriculum**

After a long and sometimes difficult gestation (Anderson 2014), the Australian National curriculum was released in 2014. In the Australian Curriculum, the Arts is a learning area that draws together related but distinct art forms. While these art forms have close relationships and are often used in interrelated ways, each involves different approaches to arts practices and critical and creative thinking that reflect distinct bodies of knowledge, understanding and skills. The curriculum examines past, current and emerging arts practices in each art form across a range of cultures and places (ACARA 2014: n.p.).

In terms of the Arts, there is an assumption that all students will study the five Arts subjects of dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts from Kindergarten (Reception) to Year 8 for a minimum of 2 hours per week. These art strands can be taught separately although

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<sup>1</sup> MySchool enables parents/educators to search the profiles of almost 9,500 Australian schools to locate statistical and contextual information about the resources and performance of schools.

given the reduced time allocation, integrated arts experiences are encouraged. In Years 9 and 10, students are able to specialise in one or more arts subjects. Unfortunately at the time of writing this article, the new National Curriculum was reviewed by Ken Wiltshire and Kevin Donnelly on behalf of the Australian Government with the recommendation that:

The core content of all five strands should be reduced ... Two of the arts strands should be mandatory ... music and visual arts. The other three strands would be elective subjects and schools would choose which to offer according to their resources ... and school context (p. 219).

As a result, schools are continuing to use their existing syllabi. In New South Wales, this means that in primary schools, students spend 6% - 10% (approximately 1.5 to 2.5 hours per week) engaged in the Creative Arts i.e. dance, drama, music and visual arts. In secondary schools, music and visual arts both have mandatory 100 hour courses while in Stage 6 (Years 11 and 12) students may enrol in elective arts courses which include dance, drama, music, photographic and digital media, visual arts and visual design.

### **The role of arts education in academic motivation, engagement and achievement**

Arts advocates worldwide have argued that the Arts are critical because they develop unique ways of thinking and knowing (Eisner, 2002; Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2007). To this end, we sought through rigorous and robust research to find substantive evidence that participation in quality arts experience does, in fact lead to improved academic and non-academic outcomes. The following article draws on the findings from a recent Australian research project conducted over a three-year period by the University of Sydney in partnership with Australia's largest Arts agency, the Australia Council for the Arts (OzCo) and funded through the Australian Research Council (ARC). *The role of arts education in academic motivation, engagement and achievement* (AEMEA) was a sequential mixed-methods research project designed to explore the relationships that exist between arts education and the academic and non-academic outcomes of students. The project included both quantitative and qualitative

strands. The first study collected longitudinal data over two years, applying Martin's (2010; 2009) *Motivation and Engagement Scale* (MES), a tool validated through extensive prior research and which was adapted to arts education classrooms. Longitudinal survey and achievement data was collected from fifteen schools in New South Wales and Canberra, Australia which included primary and secondary classes and schools from the government and non-government sector. This was to ensure the sample was representative. This study addressed two research questions:

1. What is the link between arts participation and academic and non-academic outcomes beyond socio-demographics and prior achievement?
2. What is the relative salience of specific forms of arts participation across three domains – school, home and community?

### **Methodology**

The results for the longitudinal casual ordering study (key findings can be found in Martin et al, 2013) were used to determine classrooms where positive correlations between academic and non-academic outcomes and high levels of participation in the Arts were present. It was anticipated that further in-depth exploration of these classrooms using a situated case study approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1994) would yield valuable insights into exemplary arts education processes and practices. The results from the longitudinal study were therefore used to select nine arts classrooms from five arts areas: dance, drama, media studies, music and visual arts. The researchers intended to explore these diverse arts domains as a basis for comparison (Stake, 2006) to determine divergence in practice and process and also to examine whether certain common characteristics can be found in high performing arts classrooms.

The qualitative case study research addressed three research questions:

1. What specific learning and motivation processes are involved in effective arts-based education?
2. What aspects of these processes are transferable to other academic processes and contexts?
3. What classroom practices contribute to high and low engagement in the arts and how can this inform pedagogy more broadly?

Multiple data sources were selected to allow for different perspectives and for the application of diverse analytic methods to explore the data applying Ellingson's (2011, 2009) concept of crystallization. These sources encompassed description, exposition, first-person accounts, live action, reflective accounts of action and classroom artefacts. Inter-rater reliability tests were conducted between all researchers on a sample of data prior to the case study analysis.

*Table 1.* Data sources and rationale, linking data collected to research questions

<b>Data sources</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
<b>Teachers</b> Three semi-structured interview schedules, that cover teacher background, beliefs, professional development and lifelong learning, classroom strategies, school attitudes to the Arts, reflections on research and selected moments from classroom observations.	Gain insights into the influences on teacher practice and what drives their decision-making.
Curriculum documents provided by teachers that outline class objectives, assessment tasks and learning outcomes	Provide insights into rationale behind classroom practice. Map content to teacher practices (understand intention) and student understanding
<b>Students</b> Small group semi-structured interview schedule that covers how they define motivation, engagement and achievement, how this manifests in the arts classroom, their views on arts learning transfer to other areas of learning, their future intentions in regards to arts learning	Gain insights into the processes in arts classrooms and what practices motivate and engage them.
Students' self-reflections filmed in situ based on stimulus questions that relate directly to their classroom practice. iPods were distributed to students in class.	Elicit highly contextualised responses to practices and processes
<b>Teachers and students</b> Three classroom observation schedules, each based on a dimension (categories and sub-categories) from the	To map the processes in the classroom to the categories and sub-categories of the <i>QTF</i> and to note processes that are

<i>Quality Teaching Framework</i> used by the public school system in New South Wales. Dimensions are: quality learning environment, intellectual quality and significance	significant and that fall outside of the framework. To understand how the framework is enacted in these arts classrooms
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The collected data was analysed with the aid of NVivo, which facilitated complex querying across the large dataset. NVivo also enabled direct coding of audio-visual data alongside transcripts and annotations. This approach was chosen for two key reasons: to analyse the real-time data captured on film rather than a mediated rendering of that data such as through annotations and transcripts and to capture the context, tone and “voices” of the students. The analysis took both a deductive and inductive approach. To interpret this extensive dataset (see Table 2 for details), we mapped these themes to the three dimensions of the *New South Wales Quality Teaching Framework (QTF)*: Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment and Significance (Ladwig & Gore, 2006). The *QTF* is the pedagogical model for NSW public schools, which account for 70% of schools in that state (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013), as such the framework has an influential role in defining quality teaching.<sup>2</sup> A significant outcome of this approach was the insights it gave into how the *QTF* captured and also how it failed to capture key practices and processes that were present in these classrooms. In some instances, we were able to refer to terms used within the framework although we also found it necessary to code inductively to emergent themes, some of which confirmed prior research on significant processes such as imaginative discovery (Eisner, 2002; Winner & Hetland, 2007; Seidel, Tishman, Winner, Hetland & Palmer, 2009), were not captured in the *QTF*. The 3 dimensions that comprise the *QTF* provide the structure for the themes discussed in this article. These themes are only a fraction of those identified during this research project

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<sup>2</sup> This is based on the Productive Pedagogies approach that has been widely used throughout Australia and North America.

but they do represent many of the processes most commonly noted in the data from the school case studies and as such provide evidence of the richness of quality arts learning experiences.

*Table 2.* Data collected over fieldwork period in addition to curriculum documents

School <sup>3</sup>	Class	Subject	Participants	Teacher interviews	Focus groups	Observed classes (filmed)	Student Reflections (iPod)
Ashmore HS	11	Drama	1 teacher 15 students	3	1	3	67
Bellevue PS	5/6	Vis Arts	1 teacher 23 students	3	1	3	67
Croydon GS	11	Drama	2 teachers 25 students	6	2	8	179
Northern GS	9	Drama	1 teacher 17 students	3	2	3	171
Northern GS	9	Film	1 teacher 15 students	3	2	4	34
Northern GS	10	Music	1 teacher 12 students	3	1	4	77
St Mary's	11 & 12	Dance	1 teacher 12 students	3	2	4	70
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>124</b>		<b>11</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>665, av 45 secs each</b>

### Research findings

This section details what Perkins and colleagues (1993) have termed “dispositions” that is, high-quality critical and creative thinking observed in the case study classrooms. In doing so, we found many similarities between our research and the contentions put forward by Elliot Eisner (2002) in *The arts and the creation of mind*. While Eisner continually argued that the Arts teach flexibility, learning to attend to relationships, expression, the ability to shift direction and imagination, we also found that quality Arts participation affords students an opportunity to play with ideas and actions, to establish collaborative relationships with their peers and teacher, and move in and out of unknown spaces. The classes we witnessed in our research

<sup>3</sup> All school names in this article are pseudonyms as are all names of teachers and students to ensure anonymity.

encouraged abstract thinking and set challenges and achieved gains for students from a wide range of academic abilities.

### **Intellectual Quality**

The following emerged as critical in terms of effective arts learning within the *Intellectual Quality* dimension, identified in the *QTF* as deep knowledge, deep understanding, problematic knowledge, higher order thinking, meta-language and substantive communication. This section examines how “intellectual quality” was enacted in the practices of the arts classrooms focusing on two processes: utilising the imagination and learning the aesthetics of craft. Each was in evidence in the case study classrooms and the frequency and intensity in which they appeared warrants discussion.

#### ***Utilising the imagination***

One important feature of quality arts learning experiences is that they provide not only permission but encouragement to use one’s imagination (Eisner, 2002). The capacity to think imaginatively was integral to the intellectual development of the students within these arts classes. In all of the classrooms visited as part of this research, arts educators and their students acknowledged that these were places in which the emphasis was on experimentation, exploration and discovery; settings that required them to use their imagination as a source of content for their arts-making. For example, Alice Child, the secondary drama teacher at Croydon Grammar explained “... their interest is sparked ... I keep talking about sparks and igniting things but something gets their imagination going and gets them energetic and excited.”

Observing one of Harriet Smith’s visual arts classes provided us with further insights into how primary children’s imaginations were engaged through direct, sensory experience. The Year 5/6 class had visited the Sydney Fish Market and had observed a range of different fish and spoken at length with the fishmongers about their catch. On entering the art room the

following day, the students were confronted with these same fish arranged on large trays around the room. Revisiting their previous day's experience at the fish market, Harriet encouraged her class to closely observe, carefully touch and even smell the fish thus engaging their senses and thereby their imaginations. According to Eisner (2003) "the senses feed imagination, and imagination provides content for representation ... the arts, when well taught, are fundamental in refining sensibility and cultivating the capacity to think imaginatively" (p. 343).



*Figure 1.* The day's catch. Fish brought back to the artroom following an excursion to the Sydney Fish Market



*Figure 2.* Student printmaking of barramundi scales

Tasks that required exploration and discovery in the observed classes encompassed individual work (visual arts and music) and group work (dance, drama and film). Many students contrasted arts learning as distinct from other forms of learning because the processes centred on “being creative” and “using the imagination”. The dance students, for example, said they were motivated by the opportunity to “express themselves.” One of the dance students commented:

What motivates me in dance is its fun and its different from everything else and allows me to express myself in different ways and when I get bored of talking, I get to dance and I can still get what I want to say out there. (Caterina, 17 years)

### ***Learning the aesthetics of craft***

The Arts make possible a certain quality of experience that we call aesthetic. Eisner (2003) argues that “aesthetic forms of experience are memorable” (p. 344) as evidenced by the significance of cultural events in the lives of many people. The value of these experiences are often intrinsic and in the context of education cannot be readily tested in systems focussed on test scores (Eisner, 2002). Despite this “the aesthetics of craft”; an understanding of the art form both technically and expressively emerged as a key theme within the *Intellectual Quality* dimension. It was clear that a body of knowledge was developed and cultivated in each of these arts classrooms and this enabled the deep and sustained appreciation of the students.

In her interview, Delia Levinson, the dance teacher at St Mary’s wove an appreciation of the aesthetics of dance into many of her responses, clearly demonstrating her knowledge of anatomy, physiology and choreography: “I can connect with that more scientific aspect of the discipline and the aesthetics”. Yet the beauty and expressiveness within the form was also central to her appreciation: “I love it when the legs are fully extended and you’ve got technique and the body’s awake and the lines of ballet ...” Likewise as a professional musician, the Northern Grammar music teacher, Jim Jackson acknowledged musicianship as a craft, a craft that he identified as being “intellectual.” He explained, “I need to know my craft and I need to share that passion and interest and knowledge.” That he succeeded in doing this was apparent in the classroom observations and in our discussions with students. The students spoke at length about the need to understand the craft of music, indeed a vital component of their work was examining existing canons of classical and contemporary music in ways that encouraged them to strengthen their craft and expand their knowledge of theory. In this way the students reflected on the relationship between their own practice as artists and the traditions and achievements of the masters they studied, thereby mapping their own artistic trajectories within this bigger landscape.

The dynamics of the relationship between the learner and materials, tools and instruments is at the core of artistic work and learning. Each material and art form imposes its own possibilities and limits and students are required to call upon different conceptions and skills (Eisner, 2002) in order to develop their artistry. Effective art teachers make judicious choice of materials to support the learning of their students. This purposeful selection was observed across the arts classrooms and ranged from film excerpts that were carefully selected to support key concepts and ideas to art materials that encouraged experimentation and exploration.

### **Quality Learning Environment**

A *quality learning environment* has its own independent effect on the quality of work students are able to achieve and is strongly linked “to the authenticity of the artistic processes in which the students are engaged” (Seidel et al, 2009). The quantitative phase of this research sought to identify those arts classrooms where there was a high correlation between arts participation and levels of academic motivation, engagement and achievement. It was not surprising to discover that in our discussions with both the arts teachers and their students that there were numerous references to engagement and what it looked like in the learning environment.

### ***Engagement in the arts classroom***

In discussing motivation and engagement, Martin et al (2013) note that these dispositions should be conceptualised as students’ energy and drive to learn, work effectively, and achieve to their potential at school and the behaviours that follow from this energy and drive. Motivation and engagement thus play a part in students’ interest and enjoyment of school and learning and therefore underpins students’ achievement (Martin, 2005, 2010; Meece, Wigfield & Eccles, 1990; Pintrick & De Groot, 1990).

Seidel et al (2009) maintain that engagement is both a necessary condition for and a strong indicator of high quality arts learning. Likewise Winner and Hetland (2007) argue that the disposition to engage and persist requires students to learn to embrace problems of interest, to develop focus and to work with them deeply over a sustained period of time. Clearly the roots of focused engagement were varied across the arts classrooms we visited. In the Year 9 film class at Northern Grammar School, the students were quiet and attentive as they viewed excerpts taken from the opening scenes of four classic Western films while the Year 5/6 visual arts class at Bellevue Public School, asked probing questions and then actively experimented with the printing process in order to recreate a barramundi. In both instances, there was an intensity and immediacy to become involved in the artistic processes themselves.



*Figure 3.* Year 5/6 students experiment with printmaking

Melinda Perez, Head of Drama at Northern Grammar School affirmed the teacher's role in engaging the students in the creative process. Notes taken from one observation reveal "Melinda's role as a roaming expert was instrumental to maintaining a positive learning environment in such a student-centred process, particularly in monitoring and lifting motivation and engagement levels." Engagement with artworks provides opportunities for

open communication often involving important thoughts and feelings. In order for this to be effective, relationships need to be fostered between the stakeholders. As Melinda confirms “It is all about relationships. It’s about saying the right word of encouragement to the student at the right time and that takes time ... so getting to know them [is] the most important thing I [can] do to improve their engagement”.

Students also identified their engagement with the Arts as having an impact on their attitudes to other classes. As one film student volunteered:

Well for me personally on days that I do have film I really do especially look forward to going to school and it in a way brings my mood up which helps me concentrate because I’m looking forward to getting to film which is always helpful and a good thing (Boyd, 16 years).

### ***Realising relationships***

How the arts teachers conceive of and practice their craft is contingent upon a number of factors including the prompts, cues and scaffolding they use to enable the student to succeed. Arts teaching has been described by Keith Sawyer as “scripted teaching” or “disciplined improvisation” (2004) since there is a balance of preparedness and spontaneity that is non-existent in other classrooms. This disposition was clearly present in the relationships we observed in the classroom and in our discussions with teachers and students. Harmonious relationships were generally characterised by trust and transparency between all parties. Our field notes from Northern Grammar confirm “the rapport between the teacher and students and also between the students in this class is considerable. This was not by chance. The teacher, Melinda Perez put relationship building at the centre of her practice.” Not surprisingly, Melinda’s students confirmed her role of the teacher in directing and encouraging their efforts. “She just directs us in the way ... to motivate and keep us in line. To just give us a push, yeah, so we can just move and do stuff, use our brains and be creative.” (Frank and Grant, 16 years)

A number of strategies were evident that challenged normative patterns of teacher/student relationships. To take *proxemics* as an example, the typical spatial patterns of

teacher/student interactions (teacher in front, students watching teacher; teacher above, students looking up to teacher) were repeatedly disrupted as teachers' roamed, listened and sat at the sidelines as students took control of the space. This supported and emphasised student ownership of their own learning. We were keen to learn what the teachers brought to these relationships? Alice Child, the drama teacher at Croydon Grammar explained:

Personal qualities I bring – I'm genuine and kind and try to get the kids to have experiences that will make them feel better about themselves and the world they live in.

During our site visits, we often noticed that the cultivation of a strong rapport with students was essential if students were to feel comfortable to express themselves and liberate their emotions and their imaginations within a group situation. In field notes, we recorded that: "Melinda has an easy rapport with the students – they are relaxed in her presence, are not hesitant in asking questions and are not in a hurry to get away when the bell goes. She doesn't need to raise her voice to get attention. When she starts speaking, even softly, students pay attention; those noticing first telling others to hush."

The teachers further regarded positive relationships as integral to creating a safe environment where students have "the right to fail." This emerged as an important theme with progress in the Arts often regarded as evolving out of failure. Anna Conway, the film teacher at Northern Grammar said that "big errors" need to be made safely and learnt from and these "become part of a person's toolkit for surviving in the real world".

As a primary visual arts specialist, Harriet Smith identified a safe classroom as one that encompasses strong positive support for quality student learning experiences. She maintained that "we've got a very open relationship and I think they feel safe in here. And they feel safe to say what they think about something ... So, they have a voice."

### *The "art" space*

The environment in which effective arts learning occurs has both physical and social aspects.

Elements of the physical environment include the actual space in which the learning takes place and the temporal dimension – that is the time that is allocated to the learning experience. In all cases, there was a designated arts “space” at the school and in many ways, this indicated the value that was attributed to the Arts. Thus the physical environment and the resources that accompanied it were prominent aspects of our site visits. While detailed accounts of all the settings for arts teaching is beyond the capacity of this article, a few descriptions will indicate the variations in the physical spaces that existed. We will discuss how the physical spaces supported the development of dispositions valued in these arts classrooms.

The arts classes at Northern Grammar are perhaps the most comprehensively resourced of the case studies. The school has a performing arts centre complex with a fully equipped 250-seat theatre, a drama studio, dance studio, various rehearsal spaces and offices for drama and film teaching staff. The teaching spaces have excellent IT facilities. In contrast the drama space at the Ashmore High Public School is modest. There is a large, dark room with basic facilities such as a small lighting rig and interactive whiteboard. Although the drama room is part of a larger block in the school, it is a self-contained space holding a distinct identity when contrasted with the surrounding classrooms. Despite differences in the scale and resources, both these spaces are functional and aesthetic environments that provide an invitation to and inspiration for students to express themselves freely and creatively.

From our first introduction we noted the fluidity and openness of these spaces. The staffroom door was usually open and our interviews with the teachers were marked by the coming and going of students as well as the occasional parent assisting with a forth-coming production. The spaces, including hallways, appeared to be in constant use both in breaks as well as during class.

The value of this space for student learning was acknowledged by both teachers and students. A student from Croydon Grammar articulated what we had observed on a number of

occasions when she said “like being comfortable in a space that you know is like your full bubble” (Nadia, 16 years old).

At Ashmore High, Croydon Grammar and Northern Grammar, the physical space changes according to the activity as this often seems to differentiate subjects such as drama from other academic, desk-bound subjects. The structural fluidity and open nature of these spaces is known to its community of learners and is reflected in their use. We observed the use of, and easy transition between the multiple drama spaces within a lesson at Croydon Grammar. How and when the spaces were used was informed by the structure and purpose of the work. Each space held immediate and imagined identities as they were sites for discursive out-of-role work as well as performative in-role work. The boundaries delineating these multiple spaces had fluid entry and exit points for teachers as well. This was true of lesson parameters more broadly in a number of instances.

Teachers often talk about space as “the third teacher” (Seidel, 2009, p. 43) since it is considered one of the most powerful pedagogical elements. They did not only refer to the physical aspects of their learning spaces but also attributed qualities to these spaces. For example, as part of establishing and maintaining a positive learning environment Harriet Smith asks her students to leave their negative thoughts at the door and to “bring only positive things into the artroom”. While Melinda Perez, the drama teacher at Northern Grammar values what she terms “reactionary teaching”:

I value walking into a space very open to the elements, so yes you have your scope and sequence of the journey and the learning and understanding outcomes that you’re leading towards, but there’s so many ways to get there.

Melinda often worked on the periphery, literally and metaphorically, watching as the students claimed the space and only stepping into their space when their motivation flagged or sense of direction faltered. People referred to the ideal physical space in which arts learning should occur. Drama teacher Sasha Johansson said:

I suppose the ideal would be – I mean the physical space that there's open light – I'm not into the black box spaces so much. I like the possibility of an open light space. A private space for exploring with the students as well. Where you're not going to be interrupted and you can kind of delve into things and people are free to express themselves.

Quality was also seen as linked to the authenticity of the space and this was clearly evident in the dance studio. iPod data and focus group discussions with these students suggested that the dance classroom provided an alternative learning space. One that catered for physically embodied creative opportunities as opposed to seated non-physical experiences common in other academic subjects. Within this environment, proxemics was key with the teacher using space to involve students in exploring the physicality of their dance moves as they moved in and out of spaces continually; performance space, personal space and different individual and group space.



*Figure 4.* Dance students explore the use of space

### **Significance**

The *NSW QTF* defines significance as “pedagogy that helps make learning more meaningful and important to students” (Ladwig & Gore, 2006, p. 39), this is achieved through drawing on

connections with prior knowledge and identities, on contexts outside of the classroom and on multiple perspectives.

### *Collaboration*

In an environment where students are learning to think and behave like artists (Bruner 1960) the arts classroom does not usually resemble life in so-called academic classrooms. Students are encouraged to express feelings, to share their work, to consider other's ideas, to engage in constructive critique and reflect on both processes and products. Yet each material and each art form imposes its own possibilities and constraints both on individual and group work. Whether solo or collective, arts learning experiences always involve others (Seidel et al 2009). This was especially noted in the drama classrooms we visited.

The drama teachers and students we spoke with emphasised the many benefits associated with collaboration. At Ashmore High, reinforcing the social nature of drama was the emphasis of collective learning practices. We observed that these collaborative practices existed in both whole class and small group contexts and were used in 3 key ways: i) collaborative processes of creation; ii) collaborative responsibility of creation; iii) collaborative response to creation. Sasha Johansson, the drama teacher at Ashmore described some of the collaborative practices she incorporated into her teaching practice citing "drama requires students to work in and out of multiple collaborative arrangements: simultaneously, consecutively and/or independently. These forms vary in form, nature (role, out-of-role) and size. They are not static, they may be seasonal."

In observing Melinda Perez, the Head of Drama at Northern Grammar School, our field notes detailed: "Through peer learning and collaboration, Melinda structured a learning environment that was student-driven and inquiry-based emphasising understanding over

transmission.” Moreover Alice Child, the drama teacher at Croydon High spoke of the values – the life skills associated with working with others in the drama context. She argued:

It’s just having those moments of communicating with other people, learning how to work with other people. That collaboration is so important in life. Skills in knowing when its time to assert yourself and when its time to let somebody else take the lead.

Although these examples have been drawn from the drama classrooms within the project, it should be noted that Rogoff’s (1990, 1994) notion of “a community of learners” was in evidence in many of the arts classrooms, studios and rehearsal halls we visited. The classroom milieu could easily be termed a “community of practice” (Eisner 2002). Teachers within these quality arts classrooms encouraged co-operation, autonomy and community by creating environments that were collaborative and purposeful.

### ***Open communication***

The themes of communication and open dialogue emerged frequently from our interviews but were also evident in our observations across the arts classrooms. It was clear to us that communication in high quality arts settings is multifaceted – among students, between teachers and students, among teachers and through works of art. All work of art is ultimately about communicating thoughts and feelings through image, sound or movement. According to Eisner (2002):

Work in the arts ... provides students with the challenge of talking about what they have seen, gives them opportunities, permission, and encouragement to use language in a way free from the strictures of literal description. This freedom is a way to liberate their emotions and their imagination. (p. 89)

Visual arts teacher, Harriet Smith used her communication skills as a storyteller – her use of narrative to connect to her Year 5/6 students. Stories are carefully woven into each art lesson to find connections between and among students. In her interview, Harriet responds to this effective teaching strategy:

I don’t think you can, you can’t teach in isolation can you? It’s like the Aboriginal, the wonderful Aboriginal art. Their art is about stories. The first thing is the story ... I tell them stories because I truly believe children love stories.

Even at the primary level, Harriet's students were encouraged to question, suggest alternatives, engage in constructive critique and reflect on the process of their arts-making. While this occurred throughout the art lesson, adequate time was always allocated at the end of the session for students to talk about their artworks with their peers. We noted that these conversations were honest, respectful and free of negative comments.

Feedback and critique were key components of many of the arts classrooms. At Northern Grammar, the Year 10 music students reflected positively on the opportunity to hear and analyse each other's assignment primarily because it helped them advance their own music knowledge. One student spoke of his personal stake in deeply analysing the piece of music:

I found that this assignment was quite helpful in understanding the piece more, and in how I could possibly play it better. I actually took notice of different signs saying where it should go fast, or should be played sweetly or if it should be played with feeling, different chords and progressions that I should take note of if I should emphasise them or subtle them out a little bit (Jason, 18 years old).

Dialogue in the arts classroom was often verbal but in some instances it was communicated more visually as was the case in the dance classes at St Mary's. In focus group discussions, these students offered poetic explanations as to the power of dance to communicate beyond words. For example, one student offered the following observation:

Instead of saying something to someone, you can express it through movements and they understand ... its like that difference of speaking – its like people who know different languages can talk to different people, whereas people who can dance can talk through dance (Zoe, 16 years).

The effective use of non-verbal communication was not restricted to the students within the dance classroom. Teachers in the other arts spoke of reading body language; decoding the non-verbal communication of their students as much as the verbal and documented communication. Dale Mitchell, a drama teacher at Croydon Grammar discussed how this was evidenced within his drama classroom. He said:

They rejoice in their creative experience so they'll often want to talk to you about what's happening or you'll see them talking to other people about it so there's a Communication that you observe ... body language is possibly the biggest giveaway. You see it in their face and also in their physicality.

In each arts setting, we heard conversations about the importance and value that was placed on open communication in order to create and sustain a community of practice. A place where the student's "voice" was acknowledged and dialogue between teacher and student lead to quality arts learning experiences

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the Arts encourage unique ways of thinking and knowing. They develop dispositions that ultimately lead to high-quality critical and creative thinking. In this article we have discussed the findings of recent research concerned with quality arts pedagogy. We were particularly concerned with exploring what Perkins et al (1993) termed "thinking dispositions", that is the enculturation of students into certain ways of thinking. Through our research, we gained access to a diverse collection of arts classrooms and this allowed us to identify specific processes that exemplify effective arts pedagogy. We applied three dimensions based on the *NSW Quality Teaching Framework* to explore our findings. These are intellectual quality: understanding the thinking dispositions that were developed in the case study classrooms. Quality learning environment: the conditions under which these dispositions were encouraged. Significance: the value and relationship of these dispositions to the world beyond the context of school.

In doing this we argue that the case for the Arts should not be made on an instrumental basis since it devalues what actually occurs in the arts classroom:

At a time when standardization is bleeding our schools and classrooms of their distinctive vitalities, the need for the arts and for artistry in what we do has never been more important (Eisner 2003, p. 344).

It is time to justify the Arts in terms of their core benefits. We need to acknowledge that the kinds of thinking and knowing developed by the Arts are important in and of

themselves. In order to achieve this, we need to find out what the Arts actually teach and what arts students actually learn. Rather than anecdotal accounts, now is the time to engage in robust and rigorous research that makes the case for the “untestable” skills and modes of thinking the Arts teach!

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