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Curriculum

## The vital role that the arts play in helping young people thrive in an increasingly unknown future

By Anne Drouet

Hi everyone, my name is Anne Drouet and I'm the Performing Arts Director at Hong Kong Academy. I've been teaching on and off for 25 years and have been working as an ISTA artist since 2006. More recently, I am most honoured to be serving as a member of the board of trustees. Having been in education for over two decades, I've seen some changes and as a mother of two young children in a world that is changing so fast, I often find myself questioning their needs in order to be happy and confident contributors to society one day. Witnessing first hand, the magic of ISTA festivals and the transformation that rich arts experiences can create, I'm convinced that the arts have a vital role to play in helping to develop our young people for an increasingly unknown future.

I'd like to take you back to my childhood. I grew up in the 1970s in Stratford-upon-Avon, in the middle of England. We were the only Chinese family in the community and times were sometimes really hard. I was a really quiet girl at school. Even though I was born in England, my parents raised us in an immersive Chinese home. As a result, I started my first day at primary school with just one sentence in English. I still remember the uneasy glances, the surprise, the curiosity and also, the overwhelm. There was no EAL programme back then; I had the opportunity to sink or swim. I ended up being as quiet as a mouse, constantly trying to stay unnoticed and I would die at the thought of having to read out loud in class or be forced to answer a question by the teacher. But all of this gradually changed as I found music and then later, drama at school. I know that it was music and drama that gave me an outlet to express myself and for sure, that music and drama helped me to develop self confidence as I would learn to compose, improvise and perform. Working in different ensembles also gave me the skills to connect and collaborate successfully with other people. I finished secondary school as Head Girl and a completely different person. I owed the greatest part of this transformation to the arts.

Fast forward a decade or two, the arts are now somehow regarded by so many as a middle class luxury but I'd like to take a few minutes to discuss just how important the arts are, especially in a world that is changing so rapidly. In 2006 Lisbon hosted the first World Conference on Arts Education by UNESCO. They talked about the creative potential of all humans and how *'introducing learners to artistic processes, while incorporating elements of their own culture into education, cultivates in each individual a sense of creativity and initiative, a fertile imagination,*

*emotional intelligence and a moral 'compass', a capacity for critical reflection, a sense of autonomy, and freedom of thought and action. Their research also indicated that education in and through the arts also stimulates cognitive development and can make how and what learners learn more relevant to the needs of the modern societies in which they live*'. During that conference the road map for arts education was defined. It was intended to provide advocacy and guidance for the strengthening of arts education at country level – you're probably thinking what happened, right? I'm certainly wondering that.

So why is it, do you think, that the arts suffer time and time again at the hand of budget cuts? Why is it that primary students are given the option to opt out of the arts if budgets do not allow, whereas, no schools would ever be able to opt out of maths, right? Take the IB Diploma as an example: why is it that in some schools, Group 6 subjects - the arts are offered as an option? Why are we not seeing the arts for the vital role they play in developing young people for the future?

At the World Economic Forum in 2019, Jack Ma, the founder of one of the largest tech companies in the world Ali Baba, was asked to comment on the job losses due to automation. He said: *'If we do not change the way we teach, 30 years from now we'll be in trouble. The things we teach our children are things from the past 200 years – it's knowledge-based. We cannot teach our kids to compete with machines, machines will always be smarter.'* And that's so true, right? When you stop to think about it, we'll never be able to calculate anything faster than a calculator, nor could we ever reference thousands of pieces of data in a matter of seconds, there is no contest.

Jack Ma went on to say that we have to teach our young people values and skills that no machine or Artificial Intelligence (AI) programme could ever possess. Qualities like *'independent thinking, teamwork, and caring for others'* will not just set students apart, they will ensure students can be valuable contributors to society in ways that make them irreplaceable. And how do you think Jack Ma, one of the world's richest tycoons on the planet, believes we should do this? Through the arts.

As an IB Diploma teacher, I've witnessed so many times how students and parents choose options based on careers they regard as being safe. Let's talk about that for a moment because many fields of work that our parents think of as safe are no longer secure. And with the most recent events with most of the world in lockdown, the future is being brought forward. Redundancies are being made across so many industries and it is clear to see that what most people thought of as safe industries are no longer.

Even before COVID-19, so many jobs that exist today did not even exist just five years ago. I did a quick search on the internet and learned that five years ago, we didn't have community managers, social media managers, content managers, virtual reality consultants, there were so many! I'm not sure how long unboxers have been around, but wow, if you can make a career out of taking something out of a box, who's to know what the possibilities could be in just five years' time?

I believe our job as parents and teachers is to prepare our students to succeed in the unknown

and one way to do that is to help them practice working with and working in the unknown. Everytime you step outside your comfort zone, an impact is made. The more times you do it, the more moments of impact you make and when you reflect, these moments join together, and your comfort zone has expanded. Your ability to work in unknown situations, with people you never knew before, has grown.

Imagine a world where young people who might not know each other at all can come together from all over the world and very quickly learn to trust one another, learn to play, explore, create, listen and develop ideas together, while working towards a common goal? Can you imagine the skills they would develop doing that? They would learn collaboration, creativity, empathy, leadership, and much more, but they would also learn that they have become comfortable and more courageous, working with new people in new settings with common goals. This is exactly what happens at ISTA festivals. It's magical to see. Every ISTA artist would tell you how everyone shows up to the first full group session with butterflies in their stomach and how the room is just FULL of nervous energy but in that moment, when the first circle is made and the first game is being played, you see the smiles and the trust in one another build, then there's the fun, the curiosity, the working together, the ideas and the magic.

For those of you listening who are not so familiar with the ISTA festival. It is a place where young people come to primary school, middle school or high school festivals all around the world, where as many as 100-120 students from different schools and often, different countries, are reorganised into ensemble groups to include young people from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and cultures but with one common goal – to work with an ISTA artist to explore the festival theme and stimulus over a period of a few days through intense play, fun and thrilling inquiry learning. Some festivals actually culminate in a public sharing or performance. Others, in an exhibition of learning. They all celebrate and develop curiosity, self discovery, exploration of individual and collective identities, self confidence and expression, collaboration, trust, creativity, empathy, the list goes on and often, students come away transformed, having made new connections and even life long friendships along the way. Actually it's not just for students, it's also for teachers and ISTA artists too. There's just something so special about spending an intensive few days with people who are essentially 'your clan'; people who care about similar things and share the same passions.

So to summarise, if you want to make a real impact on the world, you need a lot more than expertise or knowledge – you need understanding, you need the ability to connect with a wide variety of people on the level they are operating at, you need to understand how to transfer what you know, in a way that reaches people, that makes them feel heard and understood. So if you're a parent, student, teacher, principal or head of school listening to this and you're committed to preparing your students to succeed in an increasingly unknown future, I say please remember the vital role that learning in and through the arts play. Thank you for listening.