

Implementation and action: The challenges of a global index for arts education

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The year is 2020, and the virtual news projections are reporting the bi-annual scores on the GICE (Global Index of Culture in Education¹). Parents and politicians watch anxiously to see if it will be China, Brazil or United Europe that tops the ranks this year. A slip in places could trigger immediate actions on education while success raises the currency and leads to investment. A small nation in Oceania and another in sub-Saharan Africa see that, as two years prior, they stand near the bottom of the index.

This is a fanciful scenario, perhaps without a place in a scholarly paper, but international experience, suggests that cumulative measures, such as the PISA education measure, have a significant impact on policy and practices. Could such measures lead to a better understanding, more rigorous analysis and greater attention being paid to the arts? Would the world community embrace such measures with confidence in widespread benefit?

The Wow Factor² report and a subsequent report conducted by UNESCO in the lead up to the Seoul meeting in 2010³ give a very mixed picture of the state of arts education within the compulsory school systems around the world. The GICE example would probably paint a similar picture. But refinements, helpful or misleading, may stand out. To some extent, the GICE could suggest a glowing picture for most countries in the world that benefit from legal mandates or political duties to include arts and cultural education in schools. And the index itself may hide as much as it reveals, because there is a lack of clarity about what constitutes good - or even adequate - arts and cultural 'entitlement'. And there is even less agreement on measures of quality. Furthermore, a large part of a child's cultural education occurs outside the formal education system, and so GICE could miss the 'total picture' by a substantial margin.

The results of numerous studies suggest that artistic approaches and arts-rich curricula enhance the quality of teaching and learning, both within the arts and across other disciplines. Yet, while arts education is part of education policy in practically all countries, there is considerable difference between what is mandated and the nature and quality of the arts education programme the children in schools actually receive. Often these differences come down to which teachers children encounter and teachers' individual interests in such teaching schemes as learning history through drama, or science through visual art. Most governments at least pay-lip service to engendering a culture in which arts-rich education can thrive, yet it is generally the case that there is a gap between espoused policy in arts education and the typically poor provisions experienced within classrooms.

The proposal at hand is to develop a common way of monitoring arts and arts-related teaching, and perhaps a system that could compare the different systems for delivering and implementing arts education around the world.⁴ Having such shared understandings would enable the research, education and policy communities to quickly access information to develop and benchmark their practices and achievements in this field. Such a database could also be potentially used to examine a range of correlational aspects such as the connection between arts-rich education and educational attainment in other educational disciplines, arts-rich education and correlations with innovation or economic success, arts-rich education and correlations with social and cultural cohesion and so on.

¹ Purely imaginary!

² Bamford, A 2005 *The Wow Factor: Global Research Compendium on the Impact of Arts in Education*, Waxman, Munchen.

³ UNESCO

⁴ Once quantitative monitoring indicators are published, audiences will do their own comparing whether or not the authors produce comparisons within their reports.

By the next planned UNESCO event, proposed for 2015 in Colombia, it would be feasible to develop and implement a cumulative measurement and reporting device ('index') that could be used to indicate various countries' achievements in fully implementing arts education. Yet what are the inherent challenges of trying to make such an index?

Firstly, there are sound arguments for **not** creating an index. There is concern that the richness of children's learning (especially in the arts) is beyond measurement and should be carried-out for its own sake. Creating an index may contribute to a loss of meaning in the arts as complexities of practice and nuances of meaning could become lost as a global measure necessarily requires some form of collective understanding and uniformity. Similarly, the impact of the arts can differ markedly within the given situation in which they operate. Any international index would itself need to be evaluated and analysed. The best framework should be flexible in its approach and enlist a combination of processes.

Concurrently, what if an index showed that there were no correlations or perhaps negative correlations between the arts and other aspects of education or community life? For example one Belgian study (deliberately not referenced) showed a positive correlation between attending arts specialists schools and increased recreational drug use, while an English study found culturally active women were more likely to divorce their husbands than those not culturally active!⁵

There are also a number of difficulties in establishing a global index. The first and perhaps most important is one of definition. While there are both European and UNESCO glossaries of arts education, the definitions contained in these are complex and nuanced - too broad and they become meaningless, too narrow and they do not reveal the full extent of practice. Concurrently, the aims of arts education are numerous and embedded and without fully understanding the aims, the measurement of policy and implementation may be meaningless.

Of most significance are the complementary but different benefits that accrue through *education in the arts* disciplines and those achieved through the use of artistic approaches to the teaching and learning of other discipline areas, in other words, *education through the arts*. Monitoring of direct teaching of the arts presents many challenges; gauging arts-based teaching across the curriculum, a less transparent and less structured practice, presents added hurdles. Any index would need to look at both these aspects to understand the full picture; or would have to acknowledge such a limitation and its potential implications.

Inputs may not correspond to outputs. In some states the arts have traditionally relied on support from the public sector, in others less so. Hence funding for arts education is not limited to grants from public bodies, e.g. like ministries of education and culture, but come from a number of sources and partnerships (including from civil society). In short, not one but many different agencies – public as well as private and communal -- support arts education. This diversification of funding streams is not merely of theoretical interest. Rather, given the role of these agencies, it means that the diversity of supporting agencies in arts education needs to be considered in policy implementation.

And another complication for monitoring: Unlike other areas of the curriculum, it is highly probable that a child will get much of their arts education **outside formal education**. This would make a global index less meaningful as a number of adjunct questions would need to be asked before one could determine the success, or otherwise, of school-based interventions as opposed to a myriad of other external factors.

⁵ It is unlikely that variances in quantified measures of arts education at a state level would robustly drive societal indicators of behavior or pathology if included in well specified models. But this would not necessarily stop the promotion of simple correlation statistics for partisan purposes.

At a very basic level, would nation states be prepared to even participate in the index? Would there be enough interest to make an index viable? There is a general lack of priority given to arts education and this may also be the case in completing the data required to make the index operational. In many countries, several policy areas cover arts and cultural education and these areas of governance would need to cooperate to engage in the monitoring process. Would a monitoring process reduced to ranking states on chosen indicators collapse from a withdrawal of those states cast in a negative light? Can a monitoring system be designed that will not only show predictable differences between richer and poorer countries, but also provide indications that individual countries are to varying degrees making important commitments to arts education *given their resource bases --their per capita GDPs?*

However, these caveats notwithstanding, it is possible to draw certain overall conclusions and to find common denominators captured in a monitoring regime, which can serve as guides for future reforms, changes and revisions of current programmes of arts education. Quality is a crucial element in arts education. A global index may be more successful if it focused on processes of **quality assurance** rather than inputs or outputs into the system. These could include:

- How the teaching of arts-rich programmes is organised
- Responsibility for curriculum development and implementation of arts-rich programmes
- Differences in content and method from country to country
- What can be expected or recommended of arts-rich programmes in the future
- Establishing a knowledge-base about the organisational frameworks and other conditions which regulate and structure arts-rich programmes

Another possible element of a global monitoring scheme would be an appendix-like or supplementary document that gave space to each participating nation each two years to provide information along these (or other) lines.

1. A brief report on the climate surrounding arts education in their nations over the past two years and key concerns for the next two years. (150 words)
2. A brief description of a program or initiative in the past two years in their nation that resulted in something worth celebrating and worth pointing out to the world community. Contact information could be provided for readers who wished to follow-up. (250 words)

We don't treat such suggestions lightly. Even a page allocated to each respondent for this information could result in a 100-page document (perhaps longer). But self-reports from across the globe on conditions would be interesting. They might be motivating to respondents – something more than just another survey. Nations could, in a small way, communicate about their situations and needs. And each responding country would have a chance to hold forth on an accomplishment in arts education they would like to show off. And the sponsors of that programme would get some international recognition.