

REVIVING THE VISUAL ARTS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

I am going to talk to you tonight about Arts - the critical importance of the arts for the development of children and the extent to which the arts have been eroded from our elementary schools over the last 25 years. (Although we are concerned about the decline of all the arts within schools, my comments tonight will focus primarily on the visual arts). I am not talking about 'enrichment', or 'wouldn't it be nice if....." I am talking about the fundamental provision of education in the visual arts for all children. What we are seeking from the board, is a commitment to include visual arts as part of their educational focus for their 5 year strategic plan, in order to begin the work of revitalizing the arts within our schools.

I realize that board is currently facing enormous pressures with this years deficit and the devastating cuts you are being forced to consider) – Perhaps this context though, is in fact the ideal moment, because I want to talk about what we can do to meet the learning needs of children in classrooms right now - which I know for all of you - is at the core of why you are here. This is about finding a way forward (and I do believe there is a way forward) despite the dire financial situation, because it matters that *all* children are given the best possible opportunity to reach their full potential as citizens within our society.

So I would like you please, to turn off the "budget" tape and listen with an open mind to what I have to say.

Although the Fine arts are a core component of the mandated BC curriculum, they are often considered expendable extras. This view is largely reinforced by the emphasis on comparative achievement scores used to rank schools or provincial performance.ⁱ

While the value of the visual arts are not "measurable" in this regard, there is a *vast* body of research that demonstrates the vital importance of visual arts education for the intellectual and social emotional development of children.ⁱⁱ

So what exactly do the visual arts teach that is so important?

Research shows that education in the visual ARTs is one of the most effective means of developing critical thinking skills:

When children engage in authentic art making (and by this I mean - knowledge based art practices in which children learn to make their own aesthetic choices with both intention and purpose)ⁱⁱⁱ they develop:

- Creativity - the ability to imagine new possibilities (rather than predetermined ends)
- Flexible thinking - the ability to continually evaluate and change course mid process
- Open ended problem solving - inventing solutions and taking risks - which in turn fosters confidence and independence

It is these critical thinking skills, taught through the visual arts, that have been identified by leading economists as imperative for the 'creative economy' of the 21st century.^{iv} (According to Daniel H Pink "An MFA is the new MBA")^v

But it is not just our economy - it is our society that needs more of these skills. The latest neuroscience shows that our exclusive privileging of the rational and functional left brain is actually diminishing our capacity for engaging in right brain thinking - seeing the big picture, the ability to see alternative perspectives, sustained attention and also empathy.^{vi}

So, the arts are not only important for intellectual development, they are also crucial for the social and emotional well being of children.

An engagement in the visual arts:

- opens up the capacity to feel and perceive the world through an empathic connection. This is consistent with aboriginal ways of knowing and learning and contributes to an ethic of care for our environment and one another.^{vii}
- allows for a healthy exploration of self-identity through individual expression - and when this is celebrated, builds community and a powerful sense of belonging.^{viii} (In a world that is increasingly mediated and saturated with stereotyped images of consumer culture - this is desperately needed).
- develops sustained attention and self-regulation.^{ix}
- is for some children the primary vehicle for learning and communicating ideas, and therefore crucial for self-esteem.

Now the VSB in its own "Art in Education" policy (last revised January 1999) acknowledges all of these fundamental values of the arts and articulates everything I have just said about the importance of art education for the intellectual and social emotional development of children. It then goes on to state:

"It is the policy of the board to provide necessary personnel, facilities, materials and staff development to ensure that all students achieve to their potential in the arts."^x

When this policy was adopted, 25 years ago, Vancouver Schools were alive with the arts – the VSB had a comprehensive district program ensuring every elementary school could provide quality education in all four branches of the arts.^{xi} For the Visual arts, there were over 200 elementary teachers with specialization. Every elementary school had access to an art specialist - many working in a designated art room (parents who grew up in Vancouver remember this).^{xii} The majority of these were trained through UBC art education department, which (and many of you may not be aware of this) was renowned across North America, as it had its own studio program, and 12 internationally recognized artists and scholars leading instruction.^{xiii}

This history has largely been forgotten. In the early 90s, funding cutbacks, and subsequent policy decisions at all levels - in the district, unions, universities and schools - have resulted in a gradual but whole scale dissolution of this once vibrant program. Now, out of 90 elementary schools, there are now only 2 (prep time) art teachers and less than a handful of classroom teachers (many former art teachers) with declared training in the visual arts (Conservatively this is a 95% reduction in art specialist knowledge).^{xiv} At UBC, in the art education department, generalist teachers are now only required to take a single 6 week pedagogy course in visual arts - with little studio application.^{xv} Within the Vancouver school district, art rooms have fallen into disuse or have been reclaimed as classrooms and now threaten to be structurally eliminated under the government's 95% capacity mandate.^{xvi} The last vestige of the arts is kept alive by the Fine Arts coordinator who uses grant money from BC Council for the Arts to provide short-term artist in residency experiences and desperately needed proD and mentorship support for generalist teachers.^{xvii}

However, the cumulative result of all this is a profound loss of knowledge at both a district and school level -about the visual arts, the art making process, and their transformative potential in the lives of children.^{xviii}

An 'accidental' art education or the occasional 'enrichment' experience is no substitute for a guaranteed, comprehensive art education that is accessible to ALL children.

Currently teachers are faced with implementing a new curriculum. The new BC Curriculum's core competencies are rooted in the arts - communication, critical and creative thinking, and personal and social identity - and calls for an integration of the arts throughout the curriculum.^{xix} It is unreasonable to expect generalist teachers with no prior background or training in art making processes to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to integrate art without specialist support.^{xx}

The lack of art education effects students unequally. For some children, parents are able to compensate through private lessons, or PAC funding for art programs or

materials. Many children do not have this luxury!^{xxi} We know from longitudinal research studies that participation in the arts has significant impact on mitigating the effects of socio-economic disadvantage in all areas of life outcomes – in graduation rates, academic achievement, volunteer participation, and future employment. (These are extraordinary findings)^{xxii}

Public education should and must ensure every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential - including in the arts. This is not an option, it is a right for all children. ^{xxiii}

We are keenly aware of the financial constraints of the school board. What is fundamentally needed right now is a renewed vision and a commitment to restoring education in the visual arts in this district. **What we are asking of the board of trustees, is to include the visual arts as part of its five-year educational strategic plan.** (I believe in the power of the arts to transform lives, and school communities - I have seen it - and I also believe that there are ways to think creatively and laterally to bring back knowledge based art education into our district for all children in a financially sustainable way.) To this end, PAN will be hosting a closed, non-political roundtable discussion in May, which will bring together visual arts experts from across the arts community in Vancouver (university professors, administrators, teachers, curriculum experts, parents, artists, gallery directors, and patrons) to dialogue and generate ideas for creative solutions and possible partnerships to address some of the current challenges in providing a comprehensive arts education for all. **We are inviting all trustees and senior staff to attend as witnesses and we hope that you will come to listen and learn.** If the arts teach us anything, it is that solutions can be found if we are willing to imagine new possibilities.

Appendix A: VSB Fine Arts Policy, last updated 1999

Appendix B: First Nations Ways of Knowing

Appendix C: Correspondence with Bob Steele, Professor Emeritus, UBC Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy,

APPENDIX C

"You asked me to look back to better days when most schools in the Vancouver S.D. had art specialists and some had art rooms, I seem to remember. UBC Art Education Department was tops for preparing art teachers in those days and Greater Vancouver schools and our department benefited from an informal relationship which was close and motivated by a common understanding that art played a vital role in the psychological and sociological schooling of children. On their practicums we placed our students with art teachers we knew had good programs - both secondary and elementary - and sponsors were, as often as not, graduates of our programs themselves. Our department was the envy of art educators from other parts of Canada and from the United States. Let me tell you a bit about them.

Visitors marveled that we were in a position to teach our own studio courses which meant that we had contact with the future teachers who would be teaching art to Vancouver children and adolescents and those across the province. This meant that fabric arts students would be taught by teachers who would have studied with Professor Penny Gouldstone, an internationally known fabric artist; drawing and painting by Gordon Smith, James McDonald, Sinclair Healy, Sam Black, Doris Livingstone; Jean Weakland, pottery and Bob Steele, printmaking; Art Education theory and practice by Graeme Chalmers, Jim Gray, Ron McGregor and Michael Foster. The frequent practicums were supervised by everyone in the department, a number that never fell below 12. We were an integrated program and our students had four hoops to clear: 1) University requirements 2) Faculty of Education requirements 3) Studio requirements 4) practice teaching requirements. An Elementary Degree was a 4 year commitment; a Secondary Degree was a 5 year commitment."

Correspondence with Bob Steele, Professor Emeritus, UBC, March 15, 2016

ⁱ FSA test scores (numeracy, reading, comprehension and writing in Grade 4), are published by the Fraser Institute. "The Fraser Institute ranks schools using objective, publicly-available data such as average scores on province-wide tests." <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/school-performance-sthash.xFUG4iec.dpuf>. The BC government promotes BC's international school profile using PISA International scores that prioritize performance in mathematics, reading and science. <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>

"In the "Executive Summary" in Neuroeducation: Learning Arts and the Brain: Findings and Challenges for Educators and Researchers from the 2009 John Hopkins University Summit, William Saffire of the Dana Foundation writes,

"The empirical classroom experience of arts integration subjectively suggests that carefully structured arts-based pedagogy can improve students' learning and academic experiences, resulting in demonstrably positive outcomes that include deeper engagement in subject matter and better retention of content; greater emotional involvement in the learning process and deeper social awareness; and the ability to apply principles across disciplines. Arts integration is also important from a national, macroeconomic perspective: graduates are entering the workforce without critical skills that arts-based learning is known to promote—collaboration, creative problem-solving, and the ability to apply learning across different disciplines. Further, exposure to the arts as a participant or observer has the potential to have profound effects on learning and memory, context, and comprehensive creative thinking."

<http://steam-notstem.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/Neuroeducation.pdf>

In "Strong Arts Strong schools: The promising potential and short-sighted disregard of the arts in American schooling", Fowler links a strong arts education as an indicator of high performing schools. Educational Leadership: Strategies for Success 52.3 Oxford University Press, 1996.

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov94/vol52/num03/Strong-Arts-Strong-Schools.aspx> See also Lois Hetland and Ellen Winner, Art for our Sake: School arts classes matter more than ever - but not for the reasons you think" Boston Globe, Sept. 2, 2007

http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2007/09/02/art_for_our_sake/?page=full

Elliot Eisner, "10 lessons the arts teach" extracted from Elliot W. Eisner, The Arts and the Creation of Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<http://www.arteducators.org/advocacy/10-lessons-the-arts-teach>

Arts Education: Creating Student Success In School, Work, and Life, Unified statement from arts organizations across the US. February 2015,

[http://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2015/events/arts-advocacy-day/handbook/6.Arts Education Unified Statement.pdf](http://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2015/events/arts-advocacy-day/handbook/6.Arts%20Education%20Unified%20Statement.pdf)

ⁱⁱⁱ Bob Steele, professor Emeritus at UBC and author of Draw me a Story (Winnipeg: Peguis, 1998) draws the distinction between authentic art and spurious art.

"Authentic art is rooted in personal experience - the subject matter of observation, memory, intellect and imagination - and realized through empathic touch. Spurious art, on the other hand, has little or nothing to do with perceptual acuity, does not engage the child in thought or feeling, solves no problems, does not enhance memory or liberate imagination, does not promote and internalize the experience of empathy, is weakened by cultural stereotypes, recipes and attempts to teach skills children know intuitively. It is widely thought to be art and to fulfill the authorized requirements set out in the curriculum but it fails to do either." Correspondence with Bob Steele, April 2016.

^{iv} Edgar Cowan, "Canada's creative industries can lead the economic charge, The Globe and Mail, July 3, 2015. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rob-commentary/canadas-creative-industries-can-lead-the-economic-charge/article25236146/>

"Action Canada Creativity Unleashed: 2011-2012", Action Canada Task Force Report. It argues that the 21st century is that of the creative economy. "Leading companies and top universities have recognized creativity as a key factor in driving innovation, and by extension, productivity and prosperity." <http://www.actioncanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/AC-TF3-Creativity-Report-EN-web.pdf>. Policy Research Group, The Creative economy: Concepts and Literature Review Highlights, May 2013. Identifies Fine Arts graduates as possessing the characteristics necessary for

success in the creative economy.

<https://cch.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/inline/documents/creativeconomyliteraturereview.pdf>

^{iv} The cultural sector contributes around 5.24 billion annually to the Province. Two thirds of BC's cultural workers live in Greater Vancouver and Vancouver has the highest per capita concentration of artists in Canada. "City of Vancouver unveils strategies to enhance Arts and Culture over next five years," Georgia Straight, October 24th, 2014. <http://www.straight.com/arts/517541/city-vancouver-unveils-strategies-enhance-arts-and-culture-over-next-five-years>

^v Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind*, Riverhead Books, 2005.

^{vi} Neuropsychiatrist Ian McGilchrist argues this in his peer acclaimed work and states that technology is accelerating this problem, *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, Yale University Press, 2009. See the condensed version in "The Divided Brain", *RSA Animate*, TED, October 2011, https://www.ted.com/talks/ian_mcgilchrist_the_divided_brain

^{vii} For the First Peoples Principles of Learning see Appendix A and online at:

https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/principles_of_learning.pdf

The connection between the arts and empathy is made by numerous scholars. See most recently Erica Grimm Vance, "The Aesthetics of Attentiveness: A Philosophy for Artists and Educators", PhD dissertation, SFU, 2015. For educational research on the relationship between drawing and mental health see Bob Steele, *Draw Me a Story: An Illustrated Exploration of Drawing-as Language*, (Winnipeg: Peguis, 1998).

^x See Appendix B

^{xi} Dance and drama had time requirements within the PE and Language arts curriculum and music and art were separate specialty subjects. Conversation with Dennis Tupman, former District Principal for Performing Arts, March 2016.

^{xii} Art specialists supported visual arts education either as full time teachers or classroom teachers supplementing art education by platooning or team teaching. Conversations with Dennis Tupman, November 2015 and March 2016.

^{xiii} See Appendix C, Correspondence from Bob Steele, March 2016.

^{xiv} Dennis Tupman, former VSB District Principal of Performing Arts indicated that in 1992, there were between 200-300 art specialists dispersed throughout the district to accommodate instruction for all children within elementary schools. In November 2015, Peggy Bochun could identify 5-6 declared art specialists out of 90 elementary schools within the district. This is a reduction of over 95% in specialized art teachers over 23 years.

^{xv} Conversation with Kit Grauer, January 2016. This was recently reduced from a 13 week course previously for generalists. Elementary teachers can also choose from 9 different cohorts - one of these is Arts-based and Creativity, which would offer further opportunity to explore the visual arts. There are no Fine Art prerequisites for acceptance into the elementary 12 month program.

<http://teach.educ.ubc.ca/students/courses/201516-schedules-outlines/elementary/>.

^{xvi} *Area Standards*, BC Ministry of Education

<http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/resource-management/capital-planning/areastandards.pdf>.

This is at a time when the government has announced funding grants of \$1.5 million to establish collaborative art spaces over the next three years within the province to boost the creative economy.

[file:///localhost/Users/jacobmartens/Desktop/Creative Economy - Province of British Columbia.webarchive](file:///localhost/Users/jacobmartens/Desktop/Creative%20Economy%20-%20Province%20of%20British%20Columbia.webarchive) and "Provincial Government announces Creative Economy Strategy", *Alliance for Arts and Culture*, Feb 11, 2016. [file:///Users/jacobmartens/Desktop/Provincial Government Announces Creative Economy Strategy — Alliance for Arts + Culture.webarchive](file:///Users/jacobmartens/Desktop/Provincial%20Government%20Announces%20Creative%20Economy%20Strategy%20-%20Alliance%20for%20Arts%20+%20Culture.webarchive)

^{xvii} In the area of the Visual Arts, the Fine Art Co-ordinator, Peggy Bochun, has established extensive connections with artists and arts organizations in Vancouver; applied for and managed provincial grant funds of \$30,000 to bring artists into 82 classrooms each year; organizes pro D in the visual arts; assesses needs and provides mentors for struggling teachers; establishes community partnerships and works in cooperation with galleries, Vancouver Art and Sculpture Biennale, and

other city partners for mural projects, public art installations and art shows; spearheaded the art and mindfulness initiative; supports the sketchbook project; adjudicates and distribute funds from the Betty Welburn trust to support art projects through the district.

^{xviii} Vancouver is not alone, last years provincial satisfaction survey reported that only 42% of Grade 4 children and 34% of grade 7 children received any art in school. Government Satisfaction survey 2014/15

http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reports/pdfs/sat_survey/public.pdf

^{xix} "Core competencies are sets of intellectual, personal, and social and emotional proficiencies that all students need to develop in order to engage in deep learning and life-long learning". "Building Student Success: BC's New Curriculum" <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/competencies>

^{xx} There are many generalist teachers who have invested significant amount of their own time in research and pro D to acquire basic skills necessary to be able to incorporate the arts effectively within their classroom. The loss of specialist teachers has resulted in yet another downloaded responsibility for teachers at the school level.

^{xxi} Vancouver has the 2nd highest number of children living in poverty in metro Vancouver. In Vancouver 22% of children live in poverty. When the high percentage of independent school attendance is taken into account, there approximately 28% of public school children in Vancouver live in poverty. See First Call website <http://firstcallbc.org/publication/> and BC Provincial School Reports. <https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reporting/province.php>

^{xxii} This summary of four longitudinal studies found that children from low socio-economic backgrounds with a high arts exposure came close to and sometimes surpassed inequality gaps with children from more affluent backgrounds in test performances, post secondary attendance, graduation, volunteer work and civic involvement - including political activity. James S. Catterall, Susan A. Dumais and Gillian Hampden-Thompson, "The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies, National Endowment for the Arts, March 2012. <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/Arts-At-Risk-Youth.pdf> (28% of public school children live in poverty) It is no accident that political self-determination for indigenous groups is linked to cultural revival.

^{xxiii} Access to participation in a societies cultural production is a human right. Universal Declaration of Rights and Freedoms. Article 27. <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml - a26>