

What is Art Education?

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Art is one of the oldest subjects in the curriculum of the Malaysian public school system. Art in public schools was introduced as early as 1816 by the British colonial government. It was Winsted, an assistant director of education at that time, who believed that Malaysian children should be introduced to useful and practical arts such as carpentry, metal work, tailoring, bookbinding and drawing (Wong, 1975).

Today, art classes still exist in the schedules of elementary schools and high schools, but its aims and concepts have changed. Unfortunately, art education, as it is now called, falls into the lowest priority of school subjects. One of the reasons for art education's current status is that most universities do not consider the study of art as a requirement for

entry to the university. However, art education should be viewed as important, because it plays an important role in general education and society at large.

John Dewey, a western philosopher and scholar, believes education should be a means to expand one's intelligence, thereby increasing one's capacity to experience (Eisner, 1966). To Dewey an educational institution should encourage the growth of a child's physical, emotional and intellectual freedom.

Feldman, an art historian and educator believes that education is concerned with "the molding of character, the transmission of information and the development of

skills" (1976). The development of skills should be the major concern of educators. And if this is carried out with full commitment and responsibility, it will result in fruitful production of morally and intellectually educated children.

Education is truly concerned with the growth and development of children, mentally and physically. This growth and development of the younger generations is important, because children are the generation who will inherit the legacy of their elders. Such transfer of knowledge to them should be meaningful and valuable.

Herbert Read, another prominent figure in art and education believes

that the purpose of education is to foster an individual's growth. He elaborates further that growth in children is a complicated process. It involves "the process of adjustment of subjective feelings and emotions to the objective world and this has immense influence upon the quality of an individual's thought and understanding" (Field, 1978). Read's central concern in education is the development and growth of aesthetic sensitivity through the education of the senses, which will lead to the intellectual growth of children. By growth, Read also means that children will develop a sense of expression, which translates through sound, symbols, images, movements and the ability to exploit tools and materials (Field, 1978).

As summarized by Perry, the aim of education is to assist children in their learning where knowledge, ways of reasoning, thinking, behaving, and perceiving are properly and sincerely taught by dedicated educators (Perry, 1973).

Kern, an American art educator notes that two distinguishable patterns occur in art education. Firstly, art is concerned with educational programs, whereby students are encouraged to produce works of art for aesthetic and expressive purposes. Secondly, art is looked upon as a "means to non-art ends." This latter role involves dealing with art for therapeutic outlet, promoting of social skills, and providing opportunities to learn about history, culture and customs (Kern, 1970).

The aim of art education should be

the development and enrichment of an individual's life. The growth of mental, spiritual, moral and social attitudes develop in education, through art. It also means the enrichment of their experiences because the experience which derives from artistic expression and the understanding of art works help to develop their behavior (Efland, 1979) (Gardner, 1975) (Korzenick, 1979).

To elaborate further, art education helps children to be visually aware of their own environment. They will understand their art and culture as well as the cultures of others. They will develop good moral behavior and will understand self-discipline as well as the discipline in their society (McFee, 1966). As Lanier notes, "the teaching of art need not be to avoid or dilate a vigorous concern for purely aesthetic analysis, but can additionally involve ideals about the world and ideas of a moral character" (Lanier, 1976).

Art education is multi-faceted. It touches on several aspects that help to educate a person. An educated person in art always has feelings for learning and loves knowledge, because art is a unique and pleasurable activity. The discipline in art itself provides motivation and the interest to continually learn.

Art education helps to develop self-realization, human relationships, economic efficiency and civic responsibility (Lansing, 1969). According to Lansing, in terms of self-realization, a person who has studied art will have strong perceptive power and be aware of his environment. One can also see

things with more consciousness and attention. Bullough describes this consciousness of experience as 'physical distance' which explains the feelings such as anxiety, pleasantness, unpleasantness, nervousness, etc. towards the objects or the phenomenon (Bullough, 1912).

A person who has studied art will know better how to value his free time. He is able to create art objects and this will help to sharpen his talent and heighten his appreciation in art. Lansing adds that art activities will nurture his intellectual development through the experience of using 'discursive' and 'non discursive' modes of expression, which is not obtainable from any other sources (Lansing, 1969).

An educated person in art will find no problem in dealing with other human beings. He will develop love for humanity because art is a humanistic activity. A person's training in art helps to make him realize that every individual has his or her own limitations and strengths. By realizing this, the person begins to respect other individuals whether in the same culture or from other cultures.

Finally, art education helps to make a person's experience more meaningful. Aesthetic experience derived from art activities will make a person more sensitive of his own environment and thus will preserve and maintain the originality and freshness of the person's natural and built environment. Dickie states that aesthetic experience is "an experience of rapt attention which involves the transitive apprehension of an object's

imminent meanings and values in their full presentational immediacy" (Dickie, 1974).

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