

VALUING ARTS EDUCATION IN ISOLATED QUEENSLAND

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ABSTRACT

The city stereotype of country people as uncultivated, unsophisticated, and uninterested in the arts and its education is rejected by this study. It draws upon interviews and a survey of home-tutors and staff associated with the Longreach School of Distance Education about their views on drama and visual arts education. The authors show that while a wide range of views are held about the arts in education, most parents value their children's participation in the arts and seek further participation.

INTRODUCTION

It is a common stereotype; country people as unsophisticated and uninterested in the arts, including education in the arts. It has been especially applied to Queensland where in the words of a ditty:

... the people insult yer
And don't 'ardly know they've been rude,
There that ignorant, common and crude (cited by Astley, 1976)

A recent art review discussed the "great divide" between the coastal areas of Queensland and the inland where the arts, it was claimed:

expired in the dry pragmatic space of the interior, where disappointment is too near the surface of daily reality to allow it to intervene in the imagination.
(Mawhood, 1993, p. 9).

This paper supports previous studies that have shown this perspective to be false. The School's Commission study, Schooling in Rural Australia (1988) found that while "generally satisfied with the primary school curriculum offerings ... The main concern among parents tends to be whether teaching is provided in art, music and physical education" (p. 87). Similarly, Crowther, Postle and Walton's (1990) Needs Analysis of the Priority Country Areas Programme in Queensland found that parents, children and teachers felt that there was a lack of provision for cultural subjects in the school curriculum. In this study we will show that teachers, and many governesses and parents of isolated children value drama and visual arts in education, and even seek to increase the amount of education in these areas.

THE STUDY

The paper addresses the question: What values are apparent in the attitudes and practices of children, parents, and educational personnel in isolated areas? The study is based on the views of expressed by families and teachers associated with the Longreach School of Distance Education (LSODE) (Duncum & Cassidy, 1993). The catchment area for the School is mostly arid cattle and sheep country, and toward the Queensland/South Australia border, the population

is as low as 3 people per square thousand kilometres (PCAP, 1991). Many properties are far from even small towns. Some families generate electricity for only several hours per day. The area conforms to the stereotype of Australia as a vast and empty place. But as this study will show, attitudes towards involvement in drama and visual arts education belie any easy characterisation.

METHODOLOGY

The two authors conducted two series of taped and fully transcribed, open ended interviews, and a questionnaire of closed and open questions was also conducted. Five educational administrators, including three principals, were interviewed, as well as four class teachers, including the arts specialist. Also interviewed were two general staff members, eighteen home-tutors, including parents and governesses; and four children. Interviews were held at LSOE, on properties, and a cluster muster during a ram show (1). To the questionnaire 48 of a potential 150 families, or 32% responded. This was judged a fair return by the Deputy Principal of LSOE, and while not a high return by social science standards, the range of responses closely corresponds to the range of responses elicited during the interviews. Most interviews with home-tutors, that is parents and governesses, were conducted at a ram show. We acknowledge that this sample may not be representative of the whole population, since those attending the ram show tended to be from families which, although hard hit by the recession and drought, remained among the more wealthy and widely educated. People who had been hardest hit and in more isolated areas tended not to be represented among those interviewed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

A Range of Responses

Responses varied considerably. Clearly some parents had little time or interest in arts education, a position succinctly put by one survey respondent thus: "I would have no idea whether any of my children had an interest in this area". A comment by another respondent suggests why ignoring the arts is possible: "I don't have any idea about them and nor do the kids". A teacher said, "I know many mothers consider art a pain because it takes away precious morning time" and about drama, one home-tutor said about other home-tutors, "A lot of women are under a lot of pressure just to get the basic schooling done and they see drama and those things as frills rather than the essentials".

On the other hand, other respondents were exceptionally positive. "As far as I'm concerned" wrote one home-tutor, "we want as much art as we can possible get!". Another respondent wrote:

I would really like to help you in your inquiry. I think you're doing a real justice to these kids. I missed out on all this when I did school of the air, and I had trouble later in real school with expressing myself creatively and with drama although I love it!

WHO VALUES

Who values arts education appears to depend not on the degree of isolation, but on specific geographic location and on parents' backgrounds. A school principal noted that people varied widely depending on the community in which they lived. While some towns had populations which were constantly changing with many people who previously lived at the coast, others had a settled population with many people having lived there all their lives. Hence the cultural mix

of communities varied, and centres with changing populations tended to be more receptive to the arts.

One respondent said:

the greatest advocates (for the arts) would be the more isolated people, because they know what they're missing out on, and in the past have had the money to visit and participate in cultural activities. With the recession, these parents are aware that their children are missing out.

The varying backgrounds of families was also found to be a factor. Many families were based on what some respondents called "mixed marriages", that is, where one partner, usually the wife, came originally from the city and so was exposed to a broader cultural experience. Indeed many wives are trained teachers, and since almost always education was primarily the responsibility of female parents, children of such marriages were likely to be exposed to the arts. Many families were determined to give their children as broad an arts and cultural experience as possible to compensate for their isolation.

Even where both parents come originally from the country one or both have often spent formative years in cities, at boarding school or working. One teacher said of such parents, "They value all those sorts of things because they know the children are missing out on them here, so they really do push for those types of activities. Typical comments from home-tutors included: "For an educational philosophy I believe in the big round .. I don't believe in just the three R's. I think they (children) need to be stimulated in as many different ways as we can". "You've got to give the kids a chance to find where their niche in life is". "It's just stimulating the children's imaginations. I'm comfortable with juggling and jogging around the room and making an idiot, well in quotation marks".

EVIDENCE OF VALUING

Strong support was found for more arts activities both on-air and during cluster muster and mini-schools^(1, 2). Both mini-schools and cluster musters were seen to provide children with the few opportunities they had to interact with their peers and, beside sport, arts activities were considered the most socially interactive of subject areas. Many respondents said that it was their own lack of skills in the arts which prevented their children receiving a better arts education, and they sought assistance. "Help us first" was an oft repeated comment, and many suggestions as to when and how home-tutors could be better assisted were offered. Many called for workshops for home-tutors, either over the air, or during mini-schools which as one mother pointed out was usually wasted time for parents who with nothing else to do merely wandered about town.

The work of the arts specialist was widely praised. The Principal of LSOE said:

I know that when I leave this school and move into another primary school, that I will be trading in one of my classroom teachers for an expressive arts teacher ... It will be as essential a part of my staff as a teacher/librarian or a learning support teacher.

We believe the most significant indication of support for the work of the arts specialist, however came not from the oft repeated praise, but the reaction of home-tutors when asked, "If they had to choose between a physical education specialist and an arts specialist, which would they choose?". The significance of this question lies in the frequently observed lack of physical co-ordination among distance education children and the strong sports orientation of isolated

families. Most home-tutors were dismayed at having to make a choice and found the question exceptionally difficult to answer.

Home-tutors were also very receptive to new ideas about the arts curriculum. Although very little appraisal of either drama or visual arts is undertaken over the School of the Air or in the correspondence papers, home-tutors were almost unanimous in welcoming it.

The participation of home-tutors in the more isolated areas in the arts, while not widespread, was also noted. Some mothers were reported to have acquired notable facility in craft activities. One respondent wrote, "I know a lot of women out here who are on properties miles from anywhere who are really brilliant. They paint and they write or they make jewellery". Similarly, governesses were said to need to create their own amusements with many turning to one or more of the visual arts. The Principal of LSODE also spoke of parental involvement in Longreach in pottery, painting and theatre groups. He added:

what you see at activity days in terms of displays, the attitudes of parents and kids and their enthusiasm ... you don't need a horse whip to get something started, shows that they are very receptive to it.

Further evidence of valuing can be seen in the response to questionnaire items about whether parents and governesses thought that their children were educationally disadvantaged by distance education in general, and specifically in drama and visual art. While overall, they felt that their children were advantaged by being educated through a distance mode, a clear majority felt that their children were disadvantaged by being taught visual arts and drama through a distance mode. This conforms to the Schools Commission study of 1988. Asked the question, "Do you consider your children to be educationally advantaged or disadvantaged by having their schooling through School of the Air?" 35 replied advantaged, only 5 replied disadvantaged, while 8 were undecided. To the same question with regards to their "experience of art and drama education" the following figures were obtained.

	Art	Drama
Advantaged	16	5
Disadvantaged	30	41
Undecided	2	2

These results suggest not only an awareness of disadvantage but imply one reason for some home-tutors making special provision for their children's arts education. The disadvantages noted included a lack of feedback on artwork produced, of peer contact, of resources, of exposure to artforms, and the inhibitions of home-tutors. Peer contact was especially acute for drama. The frustration of one mother is evident in the comment: "It's difficult to be going through a play not seeing other people in it and not being dressed for the part. How do the children enter the role if they're dressed in their old clothes talking to a hand piece". Exposure to drama was usually limited to television, and a typical comment was, "The children don't have enough exposure to pantomimes, puppet shows, anything live".

However, a lack of exposure to drama appeared to be confined to isolated areas rather than the towns. One Barcaldine school principal held the view that children were exposed to more live performances than is normal in a large city.

One response to the tyranny of distance is the fostering of an interest in radio plays with an emphasis on vocal characterisation. Accents, inflections, tone, and expression were said to be highly advanced, and pride was clearly taken in these achievements.

The importance placed on visual art by LSODE is literally displayed, as the School building is festooned with children's artwork. When walking about much of the building it is necessary to constantly duck underneath artwork which hangs from the ceiling and to step around the many displays.

Nevertheless, home-tutors were consistently critical of LSODE in not providing skills in the arts. While appreciating the efforts of the School to encourage creative activity, home-tutors argued that children required skills to develop. Many suggestions were made about how to provide skills through handbooks and videos.

We have discussed how parents, governesses and teachers indicate their valuing of formal arts education. Isolated children also indicate their interest through their self-initiated or unsolicited participation in drama and visual arts. Home-tutors mentioned that children engaged in unsolicited play, script writing, tape recording their plays, finger puppet plays, dressing up and role playing especially of characters from books and television, made dance steps to songs, and animated written stories including sound effects on tape. Sometimes farm animals were involved in the role plays. An exceptional example, one which involved considerable parental investment as well, involved eight children who initiated, devised, and presented a scripted play. They began by conferring on-air in the afternoons for many weeks before travelling to Longreach for three days to rehearse, and design and make a set and props. The play was performed before parents and teachers. The children were then driven to Mount Isa to compete in the North Western Region heats of Tournament of the Minds and they won.

Children were reported also to be "always drawing and painting". One mother commented, "My daughter draws and reads practically non-stop, day in and day out". One grade 3 girl commented that she frequently drew during her half hour lesson on air, and sometimes was lost in her drawing when she was asked a direct question by her teacher. She said that she would respond, "Oh sorry Miss ... but there was static on the line, would you mind repeating the question".

Other visual arts activities mentioned included collage, working with clay, hat making, models out of boxes and paper mache, mobiles, doll clothes, masks, mud cities, and play dough story maps. The materials used were numerous, including old, well boiled bones.

Typical comments on these activities from home-tutors included, "Sometimes, they'll devise a play for a special occasion when grandparents are here, but the imagination is always going. "Its the (School of the Air) ones who are really interested in things, they do the most interesting work, much more individual and creative and original than the town children". What we believe this suggests is a recognition, even celebration, of their children's participation in spontaneous drama and visual arts which is borne, partly, out of being so closely involved with their children during the day. It appears one reason so many parents value the arts in education is that their children initiate their own participation.

REASONS FOR VALUING

Many of the comments above provide the basis for how the arts are seen to benefit children. They include recognition of their children's own interests, the need to compensate for children's lack of cultural experience in isolated areas; a belief that arts can contribute to other learning, especially language; provide opportunities for creative and imaginative experiences; and even help later employment opportunities. These reasons are part of a broader recognition that children will not necessarily stay in isolated areas and need broad educational experiences to

live successfully in large towns and cities. The Principal of LSOE said, "People can see if you want to take advantage of new knowledge ... you have to be receptive to it".

CONCLUSION

We found that the stereotype of country people as uncultivated and uninterested in the arts and its education to be false. Parents with backgrounds which included some years spent in cities were found to be particularly sensitive to the limitation imposed by isolation and to compensate accordingly. Some home-tutors participated in the arts, both in towns and the most remote areas, and most children participated unsolicited in both drama and visual arts activities. A very wide range of activities were noted. Since parents of isolated children have far more intimate understanding of their children's educational needs than city parents, their observation of their children's spontaneous activity appears to have influenced the common perception among home-tutors that drama and visual arts provide for a rounded education. The arts were valued as outlets for feelings and emotions, as well as facilitators of the imagination. That so many parents, governesses and educational personnel value the arts in education raises the question: Why do educational systems not value them so highly?

NOTES

1. Cluster musters are conducted in specific regions, usually to coincide with special events like an agricultural show, and involve children from all grades.
2. Mini-schools are conducted at LSOE at Longreach and involve a limited number of grades each from the whole catchment area.

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