

Arts-rich Schools

The Pulsing Heart of Arts Access

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In countries such as South Africa where access to the arts is largely a matter of luck – where you are born, the relative wealth of your family, their interest in or exposure to the arts – the one place that children can hope to experience the arts as a matter of course, is through their school.

Arts education and access were denied to black children under apartheid, while for those like myself (white, growing up in a middle class suburb), we were “lucky” enough to have access to the arts throughout our education. My parents were keenly invested in the arts, but even if they had not been, I would have experienced drama, visual arts, dance, and music through every stage of schooling with an opportunity to see professional work and participate in the arts throughout. I was lucky enough to experience *arts-rich schools* as part of my education and it enriched my life immeasurably.

Post-apartheid, the South African government sought to redress the wrongs of the past, and made the arts a compulsory part of the curriculum from reception year through to Grade 9 for every South African learner. However, this did not mean that every school became an arts-rich school. Unfortunately, due to poor implementation of this policy, there are still many children in South Africa unable to access the arts in school. The reasons are many: lack of funding and competing priorities, untrained or disinterested teachers, principals without commitment to the arts, parents who themselves have never experienced the arts as valuable, and no systematic approach to ensuring consistent, quality arts provision, with support from government or other funders.

But access to the arts should not be a matter of luck. And particularly within the context of democracy, which promises equal rights and opportunities to all members of society, as well as equal capacity for free engagement, dialogue and expression.

ASSITEJ South Africa is addressing this challenge by championing *arts-rich schools*, celebrating and accrediting those who are already arts-rich in some way, and supporting others to become more arts-rich. We have signed an MOU with the Department of Basic Education to assist in making this vision a reality, but we are just at the beginning of this journey.

In our view there are five dimensions to Arts-richness, and each contributes, in its way, to a more democratic society. These dimensions are: Arts in school (as part of the formal curriculum), Arts after school (providing opportunities for participation and self-expression), Arts as method (where arts-based approaches are used for non-arts subjects), Arts in community (where the arts become the vehicle for schools to engage more broadly), and Arts Encounters (providing professional experiences of the arts, such as professional theatre).

We asked people participating in different aspects of this work to share with us how the projects they have experienced have created “arts-richness”.

Arts In The Curriculum:

Through workshops for teachers and sending artist-facilitators into classrooms to team-teach with them, we note improvements in the quality of arts education that results in higher overall learner engagement. As Masego, a teacher from Montshiwa Primary School, Kimberley has said, “I’ve been doing the Kickstarter project and ... the project has had a huge impact on the school and the learners as well. The learners are very eager to come to the classrooms, learners are eager and willing to do the assignments or the drama or to bring instruments or things needed to make the things happen in the classroom. The project has brought so many changes and teaching has become so easy with people from the Kickstarter that come and help us.”

Here, we see how improved arts in the curriculum facilitates greater participation in the learning process.

Arts After School:

We are Instructables was a Belgian-South African artistic collaboration which encouraged young people working in after school programmes to connect virtually with one another and to create instructions for one another’s artworks. This process empowered the learners to be more creative, as they got to determine what others created and in turn had to respond creatively to instructions from others, in contexts very different to their own. As Kgomotso from Phoenix College High School said, “I learned how much I can be creative as a person because this was the first time I was given a task to instruct others and I was able to use my creativity and actually learn that I don’t need to keep my ideas in my mind but I can share them with other people and we can use them creatively all together.”

The project speaks to how theatre practice can break barriers between people from very different backgrounds, and encourage self-expression, a key element in democratic participation.

Arts As Method:

Jefferson Dirks Korkee, an ASSITEJ South Africa facilitator who has worked on creating innovative lessons using arts-based techniques, says, “With this project, teachers are provided with creative and innovative methods to use when teaching, so

that learners can enjoy the learning process. Learning should be fun, and it should ensure a safe environment. The Creative Arts methods that we are making use of give a sense of ownership to the teacher, but most importantly to the learners. With an Arts-based approach, the young ones enter the learning environment with an understanding that their prior knowledge matters, and what they obtain from their communities and on the playground plays a vital role in the classroom. The learners feel somehow empowered and confident to participate in the activities, no matter the subject area.”

Here we see how democratic values are embedded in the learning process.

Arts In Community:

Arts in schools can provide an interface between communities and the school, empowering those who feel that they are marginalised or overlooked. One such example is Aviwe Mabhuti, who said about the arts workshops that he attended: “I have never been into a community where I can voice my views out, being listened to, accepted as I am and feel so welcomed around people who are not living with disabilities. But now I would say I have a family here. I will invite my sister for the final showcase to experience my abilities which they never thought I have.”

Here we see how arts in community encourages social inclusion and acceptance of diversity.

Sometimes, the arts brings communities together around an issue. The *Girl power project* involved children addressing their communities through plays on gender-based violence; their performances were attended by ward councillors and other leading community members. One of these ward councillors said, “This amazing production that was performed by the Roselands learners, blew the entire audience away. The team taught with such much love, passion and dedication and that’s what we witnessed as the audience. Their performance opened up my eyes to the many opportunities that are out there in the community to showcase what our beautiful young learners are capable of teaching other learners and the community at large. I most definitely would like to have the *Girl Power project* rolled out to other schools in the Ward. It would definitely bring value to the entire community at large.”

The *Girl Power project* is an example of activism, where theatre is used to speak back to societal issues and to bring about social change, empowering young people to be at the heart of the conversation.

Arts Encounters:

And finally let’s think about encountering theatre itself.

The Young Critics programme of ASSITEJ South Africa gives young people the opportunity to share their responses to the plays they encounter... here we see how Nala Phethu expresses the deep empathy he experienced while witnessing *The King of Broken Things*.

“It is at this moment you realize how familiar you are with this kid. He is you. Your reflection on a stage sprawled with broken things. You are now familiar with this kid as you are with yourself, as he takes us on a journey of seeing the beauty in life. Despite him being bullied at school and a split between his parents, he instils in us a

belief. A belief that reassures us that anything can be fixed if only you believe ... You feel the nurturing nature of your heart extending its arms to embrace him as he mentions his absent father as his role model and his best friend. Who was also a „king of broken things” alongside his son. Before things changed ... *The King of Broken Things* will leave you with a fresh perspective on all that is broken, through a heartwarming, magical journey into a boy’s workshop and his thoughts and imaginations. And his heart.”

In my view, if we are able to pay attention to each of the dimensions of arts-richness as suggested above, we can see how schools can be transformed into heart spaces where democratic values are practiced and embraced.