

## Arts Education in Iran: Reclaiming the Lost Ground

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### Abstract

In most of the education systems throughout the world, art is viewed as a subject of study with secondary importance. This is while art, understood in light of its profound impact on the development of human cultures, can perform unique educational functions that are out of the reach of other subjects. All-round education, therefore, is only obtained through an art-reach education program.

Art education has been subject to a historical isolation and inadequate attention in the education system of Iran. Recently, though, policy makers have initiated a comprehensive reform in this area. The initiative starts from the elementary school and will cover all the stages of schooling in a piecemeal style. This article presents the reader with an account of the current situation and reviews the newly adopted art curricula for the elementary school. A critique of the new curricula in light of the author's version of an ideal curriculum appears in the concluding section of the article.

Keywords: Education, Iran, Reclaiming the Lost Ground

### Art Education: Necessary or Just Nice?

Harry Broudy (1979) posed this serious and thought provocative question to policy makers throughout the world about twenty five years ago. In light of inadequate attention paid to arts in the education systems, the question has preserved its recency and validity today. This is while Broudy, along with many

other education specialists, have provided rather persuasive answers to this question. Their answers, although resting on different grounds, all point to the fact that art education should be part and parcel of any defensible basic education scheme, or the 4<sup>th</sup> R.

Elliot Eisner (1983, 1998), for example, has taken a

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position along the same line, rooted in a different definition or conception of literacy. He contends that literacy should no longer be limited to reading, writing and arithmetic. A broader and a more comprehensive account of literacy should encompass all symbol systems or languages created to perform a unique epistemic function (Eisner, 1998, p.11). He further insists that different languages have indeed been created out of absolute necessity since redundancy and repetition would have resulted in a less pluralistic situation than we are witnessing today (1983, p.50). The ability to decode and encode meaning within each of the extant symbol systems, therefore, is an essential power and skill that a fully literate (in contrast to “semi-literate”) individual should possess. Arts representing the prime example of non-conventional symbol systems can effectively complement the range of languages, or cultural tools, available to the next generations for purposes of communication and mutual understanding.

If the above rationale could be characterized as the cognitive rationale (also known as “cognitive pluralism” argument) for acknowledging the status of arts as the 4<sup>th</sup> R of the basic education system, non-cognitive rationales have also been proposed. This line of argument can be linked to the discourse holding education systems responsible to the phenomenon known as globalization. Education systems’ response to globalization, it is argued, should be reflected in consciously pursuing the goal of “global literacy”. Although pursuing such a goal is not the only reaction possible when dealing with the issue of globalization, yet many education systems have opted for this route, an example of which is the education system in Iran now experimenting with an international education program focusing on knowledge, skills and attitudes deemed necessary for global citizenship (Pike and Selby, 1995).

Arts, understood correctly should be regarded both as an end and also as means to achieving global literacy or

educating global citizens. It is an end since arts and art traditions embody a significant portion of differences in life styles and ways of understanding the world, which constitute the substance or the subject matter of global study initiatives. One is reminded of the stimulating observation and characterization of Dissayanake (1991) who regards aesthetic or artistic dispositions as a discriminating element of human identity by coining the term “homoaestheticus”.

Arts, however, can also perform the role of an effective means to achieve the goal of global citizenship in education systems. The arts can greatly enhance and enrich the quality of relevant experiences and improve the efficacy of such educative processes. Broudy’s contention that aesthetic experience denotes a unique type of experience, which is cognitive and emotive at the same time, is most illuminating in discussing this point. Broudy (1999) has coined the term “cognitive feeling” or “feelingful cognition” to show the dual qualities of aesthetic experience (p.11). More clearly he maintains that to insightfully appreciate what other humans cherish and why, educators are better off to resort to aesthetic images produced in different cultures, representing “portrays of feelings and emotions” bearing the fruit of “enlightened cherishing” (Broudy, 1972).

Still another powerful argument is put forth by Ohler (2000) where he considers the most fundamental implications of the digital age and suggests that arts must become the 4<sup>th</sup> R. By way of elaboration, he refers to the fact that the multimedia environment of the web as well as much of what we experience through our computers, requires students to think and communicate as designers and artists. The language of the art, he maintains, has thus become the next literacy. In the digital age therefore, art skills are not just good for the soul, but they ultimately provide access to employment.

Rudolf Arnheim (1989) is another well-known

proponent of arts in education who puts forth a convincing argument in favor of arts becoming an indispensable component of any basic education curricula. He reaches this conclusion through yet another line of reasoning. Arts, he contends, should operate as one of three cultural areas of learning needed to cope successfully with every branch of curriculum. The other two areas are perceived to be philosophy and language training.

In light of the foregoing discussion one could conclude that enough theoretical justifications exist to support the position that art is not just nice but a necessary and basic component of any education system. These arguments vividly indicate that making the arts out of the reach of next generation is utterly unwarranted and unwise. Wise, responsible and timely

curriculum decision making, in other words, cannot afford to make the arts subordinate to other subjects. Such decision will be judged as being founded on anachronistic conceptions of arts or education in general. The absence of arts from the curriculum, I suggest, is an obvious indication of the curriculum being hit by the destructive blow of what has been referred to as "null" curriculum.

### Art Curriculum in the Education System of Iran: Elementary Level

Art existed in the Iranian elementary school timetable since nearly one hundred years ago, coinciding with the beginning of modern education in Iran. The following tables place arts education at this stage of schooling in historical perspective:

Table 1 Total Hours of Instruction /Week

Grade Year*	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>
1927	24	30	30	30	30	30
1937	22	28	28	28	28	28
1940	22	28	28	28	28	28
1949	18	26	28	28	28	28
1963	28	28	28	28	28	28
1966	28	28	28	28	28	-**
1979	24	24	28	28	28	-**
1994	24	24	24	24	24	-**

Source: Rooholamini (2001)

\* Junctures where curriculum change has taken place.

\*\* The education system was restructured and elementary education was reduced to 5 years.

The average hours of instruction in the arts at each juncture is presented in the following graph. The pattern of fluctuations resembling a bell shape is interesting to note and requires historical investigation to come up

with reasonable explanation (s).\*

It is unfortunate to witness a drop of close to 70 percent in terms of time allocated to arts instruction

\* As far as the author of this article is aware no such investigation has been carried out.

within three decades (1963-1994). Compared to the first three decades of 1937-1963 where a gradual increase in the amount of time spent for arts testifies to the increasing realization of the significance of art, the last three decades show the opposite trend which is a source of concern.

A different analysis of the numbers and figures presented in Table 2 is also illuminating. Whereas Figure 1 shows average time spent on art instruction across elementary grades, the following table juxtaposes different grade levels in terms of amount of time allocated to arts within the same span of time.

Table 2 Hours of Instruction Allocated to Arts

Grade Year	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>
1927	-	-	-	-	-	-
1937	1	1	3	4	3	3
1940	1	4	4	4	6	6
1949	1	2	5	5	6	6
1963	5	5	5	5	8	8
1966	5	5	4	4	4	-
1979	2	3	-	2	2	-
1994	2	2	1.5	1.5	1.5	-

Source: J.H. Rooholamini (2001)

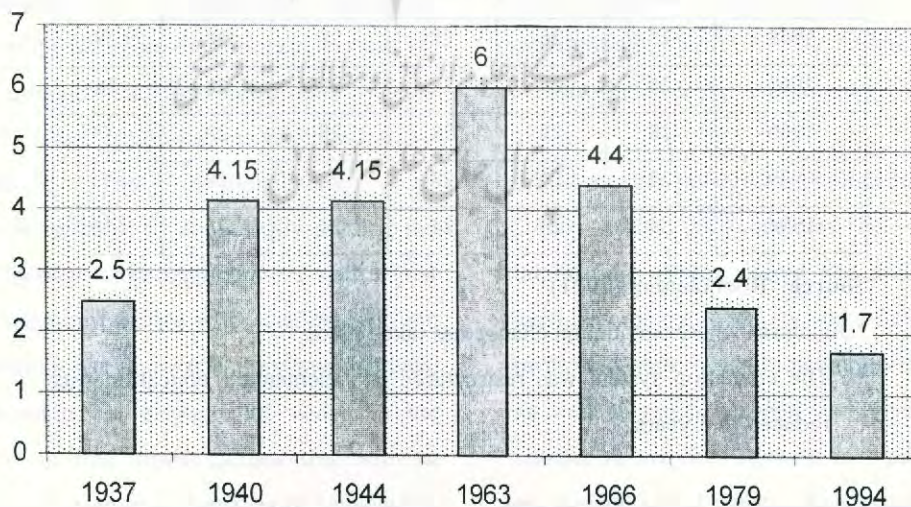


Figure 1 Average Hours of Art Instruction Across Elementary Grades

**Table 3** Fluctuations of instructional Time for Each Grade

Grade Hrs. WK	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>
	Maximum	5 (1963,1966)	5 (91963,1966)	5 (1949,1963)	5 (1949,1963)	8 (1963)
Minimum	1 (1967)	1 (1967)	1.5 (1994)	1.5 (1994)	1.5 (1994)	3 (1927)
Average	2.4	3.1	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.6

In light of the fact that arts education still operates under the same instructional time mandate of one decade ago (1994), one could conclude that arts program is not receiving sufficient time and resources in the education system today. As a symptom it signals the necessity of formulating new policies and directions in this area of study.

Obviously, the required policy mediation neither starts nor ends with the reconsideration of time allocation. It would be worth considering another important curriculum commonplace that is the content areas dealt with in the arts curricula between 1937 to 2004. The analysis of pertinent documents reveals the following domains of artistic activity being included in the formal program of schooling at the elementary level:

1937: choral activities, painting, drawing, calligraphy

1940: choral activities, painting, handcraft, drawing, calligraphy

1949: choral activities, painting, handcraft, calligraphy

1963: choral activities, handcraft

1966: art and handcraft

1979: art and calligraphy

1994- present: painting, handcraft, calligraphy

The responsibility for devising arts curriculum, during

most of the aforementioned periods, was delegated to schools and teachers. Education authorities, in other words, did not deem it necessary to produce textbooks or other educational materials for arts education, especially for primary grades.

Although a potentially positive approach, when interpreted within the context of a highly centralized and prescriptive education system, such as Iran, different conclusion might be reached. A plausible explanation for this delegatory approach should take into account the issue of priority attached to different subjects justifying differential investment in different aspects of curriculum development process with reference to different areas of learning.

Generally speaking, it could be argued that art curriculum in the education system of Iran has been suffering from two serious inadequacies. The problems, however, have intensified in the past couple of decades, stimulating the recent encompassing reform movement starting from the elementary stage. Before introducing the recent reform and the new arts curricula developed to help offsetting the predicaments in arts education, however, a brief account of the misfortunes is in order.

In discussing the two major inadequacies, I will draw

on an expanded interpretation of the concept of null curriculum. Null curriculum calls the attention of curriculum developers and policy makers to what is left out of the curriculum, or error of omission (Eisner, 1994). Are the subject matters and the thinking processes kept in the school curriculum based on deliberations taking into account all the options and alternatives, or quite the contrary, they are there due to habitual and traditional way of thinking about curriculum? Null curriculum, therefore, is a potent concept that prompts a recurring dialogue and conversation, so to speak, between the elements and the entities included and those that are excluded from the curriculum. It, therefore, must be welcomed in curriculum discourse for this rather worthwhile contribution. Curriculum deliberation informed by the implications of this concept thus yields a more justified and defensible outcome.

I have argued elsewhere (Mehrmohammadi, 2002), however, that the nuances and the delicacies associated with this concept have not been taken into account fully by curriculum theorists and practitioners. To resolve this issue, I have proposed that the contributions of this concept are not limited to the formal curriculum or programs of schooling. A cursory examination of the timetable or guides and frameworks setting the agenda for schooling may disguise other manifestations of null curriculum\*. What is needed, is to move beyond the observable and to entertain the possibility that while a subject matter may enjoy a visible status in the formal curriculum it may turn into an endangered species when the implemented or operational curriculum come under scrutiny (Mehrmohammadi,). Paying attention to what happens in the actual teaching-learning process could reveal neglect or indifference in light of which an area

of study may be judged as having shifted to the realm of null curriculum. The argument is straightforward. If null curriculum represents deprivations and deficiencies in terms of the learning experiences of the students, circumstances like this will obviously qualify as examples of null curriculum. I have labeled this phenomenon as "hidden null" (Mehrmohammadi.) and would argue that arts education in Iran can be a candidate for it. In other words, research as well as experiences of the author indicate that arts have usually been conceived as an area of experience that could be safely eliminated in times of pressure, accountability and lack of resources. In a more specific sense, arts have usually suffered from a status problem, which manifests itself particularly at the level of practice.

In general, the status problem associated with arts as a subject of study, representing the first major problem in arts education in Iran, was sure to radiate into the policy making realm. Policy makers, attention is naturally focused on subject matters that enjoyed a higher status in the perceived hierarchy of learning areas and away from the arts. As a result of such insensitive attitude, reform initiatives did not address arts as a priority area and arts either continued as a subject without a supporting curriculum guide or a subject matter that had to cope with curriculum materials no longer viewed as timely (Jacobs, 2004). Untimely curriculum, I contend, is yet another manifestation of null curriculum, suggesting the second major problem afflicting arts education in Iran. More Specifically, this is another aspect of "hidden null" where an area of learning can be both "present" and "absent" at the same time. Goals, content, teaching learning strategies, etc. that defy changes demanded by new circumstances and exigencies should be understood as an instance of null, or "hidden

\* Although in the case of arts education in Iran, desires and aspirations did not, in most of the times and for most of the elementary grades, culminate in the production of curriculum guides and appropriate teaching-learning materials either.

null", curriculum. Over time, arts education in Iran has reached a stage where it could be fairly characterized as such.

### The New Arts Program

Year 2000 marked the beginning of long term project aimed at reviving arts education starting with the elementary stage. The first and the most important step was considered to be curriculum development. The new curriculum, through a challenging and time consuming process of deliberation, which took more than two years (ORCD, 2003) was produced and then subjected to numerous rounds of validation and field-testing (Navvab Safavi, 2002). The new program will gradually replace the old curriculum, starting from the first grade and incorporating an additional grade each school year. The overall implementation covering all elementary grades, therefore, will take until 2008, providing a realistic time frame for effectively managing the complex and multifaceted change process\*.

The new art curriculum is guided by the following principles (Navvab Safavi, 2002):

1. Arts should be recognized as an independent subject of study.
2. Art curriculum should give due attention to different content areas and activities.
3. The program should incorporate multiple art domains while remaining watchful of individual differences (preferences) of students and differences in terms of local cultures and art traditions.
4. Arts curriculum should refrain from adopting a prescriptive approach and allow local initiatives in the process of operationalization and implementation.
5. Art curriculum should encourage active learning, experimenting and problem solving on the part of

students. Through such learning processes students' qualities such as curiosity, imagination and creativity are better nurtured.

6. Teachers should play a facilitative role and supervise students' activities.
7. Arts curriculum should stand out for providing opportunities where special human potentials such as initiation, self-confidence and tolerance for ambiguity are exercised and nourished.
8. Arts curriculum should encourage, promote and facilitate interconnectedness between different domains of art. Activities and projects comprised of different parts (painting, drawing, storytelling, role playing, object building, etc.) is the most proper means to achieve this end.
9. Arts curriculum should promote collaborative planning at the classroom level and students' input should be actively sought in making curricular decisions.
10. Art curriculum should encourage collaborative learning. Group activities along with individual activities should permeate the learning process in the arts. Arts education should thus facilitate social development as well.

The goals and objectives set for this program recognizes development and growth in three distinct areas, namely knowledge, skills and attitudes. The knowledge goals are as follows:

1. Familiarity with nature as the inspiring source for artistic creation.
2. Familiarity with different areas of artistic activity.
3. Knowledge of material and instruments used within each domain of artistic activity.
4. Familiarity with the cultural and artistic heritage and traditions.

\* Developing a new arts curricula for middle schools (grades 6-8) has recently been defined as the next development project in pursuing the goal of devising a comprehensive reform initiative to avoid possible discontinuity in the process of arts education.

As far as skills are concerned, the following goals are being sought through the program:

1. Cultivation of sensory skills
2. Cultivation of verbal skills
3. Cultivation of motor skills
4. Capability in using different art forms to express thoughts and feelings.
5. Development of social skills.

With regards to attitudinal goals the following are stressed:

1. Appreciation of beauty through the cultivation of aesthetic sense.
2. Enjoying the expression of thoughts and feelings using artistic forms.
3. Development of a self-reliant and self-confident character.
4. Enjoying inquiry and experimenting with different art forms.
5. Caring for art products and cultural heritage.
6. Showing inclination to communicate and participate in group activities.

The content areas included in the new art program represent a radical departure from the areas included in the last (existing) program which only covered three areas of painting, handcraft and calligraphy. The new program has expanded the artistic domains and incorporates areas such as music (rhythm and melody), painting, handcraft (collage, print, pottery), story (telling and writing), theatre and cultural heritage.

### Critique, Evaluation, Final Words

The new initiative should undoubtedly be judged as a step toward the right direction. Close to eight million elementary students are going to experience a program which has the potential to transform the current situation and to improve the quality of arts education with a depth and breadth unprecedented in the history of modern education in Iran. There are many strengths associated

with the new program and the deficiencies will be adequately dealt with as the education system proceeds with its calculated and gradual implementation strategy.

However, some fundamental questions can still be raised. Questions like: How would this program be fair with respect to the broad criteria of being timely? To what degree is the new curriculum responsive to the accumulated knowledge and experiences available in the area of arts education? To what degree does the program draw upon or rely on the knowledge available in the field of curriculum?

The author, who has incidentally served as an external consultant to the new arts curriculum development project, believes that there is still room for improvement, which further scrutiny guided by questions like the ones posed above can make it possible. In the concluding section of this essay, I will voice some of my personal observations and reservations rooted in the conception I subscribe to as the ideal arts curriculum (Amini, 2001):\*

□ A timely arts curriculum is necessarily a curriculum with a multi cultural orientation. If global literacy is one of the exigencies of present times, education systems should capitalize on the power and potential of all curriculum areas to facilitate the achievement of this goal. Arts curriculum, as alluded to earlier, can play a special role in this respect. A balanced treatment of the aspects of art as practiced in other societies is a useful criteria to evaluate any initiative in this area. The new art curriculum for elementary schools in Iran does not live up to this expectations and requires further attention.

□ The last two decades has witnessed many debates and controversies revolving around the question of what image of art education should guide the practical development process. As a result art education discourse has experienced a dynamism

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\* I served as the supervisor of this doctoral dissertation and draw most of the ideas discussed in this section from this research.



and vitality unprecedented in this field.

- Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) (Greer, 1984), has evolved as a viable alternative which could inform the curriculum deliberation process. The author regards DBAE as an approach to art education, which incorporates other rival alternatives and as such representing not a single framework but a synthesis encompassing all others. It is, therefore, reasonable to use the distinguishing elements of this approach to judge the new curriculum initiative. Close examination of this program reveals, for example, that systematic and balanced attention to four aspects of art education advocated by DBAE (production, criticism, history and aesthetics) is missing.
- Insightful curriculum decision making specially in the area of arts should consciously provide for qualities of "emergence" and "expressiveness" in the process of education (Eisner, 1994). This can take place in many ways. One important way, however, is to purposefully leave a portion of the curriculum undefined or unprescribed. Mechanisms of localized or school based decision making could then be applied to make context specific decisions. In short, I agree with Walling (2000) that an art program is more defensible if comprised of two complementary parts, the structured (universal) and unstructured (individual). The unstructured invites further exercise of freedom, imagination and creativity on the part of teachers and students and can, therefore, compound the relevant learning outcomes. The new arts curriculum, although not completely negligent, but does not show enough sensitivity to this fundamental point.
- A model arts curriculum should try to take advantage of the natural opportunities associated with the teaching-learning process of other subject

areas. In other words, development of artistic capabilities of students can become the "Secondary function" of nearly all other subject areas, transforming arts into the "meta-curriculum" of the education system (Jacobs, 1989). Curriculum developers in the arts should demonstrate a wholistic disposition and try to establish what Arnheim refers to as the "network of relations" (1989, p. 56). The new curriculum discussed in this essay has not systematically dealt with the issue of how the whole curriculum of the elementary school can be aligned with or linked to the new arts curriculum through carefully defined secondary function links. Creating an arts friendly education environment, I suspect, did not enter the deliberation process.

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