

ARTS AND CULTURAL EDUCATION DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EFFECTS AND IMPACTS

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Abstract

Many voices in policy and practice have emphasized, on many different occasions, the importance of arts and cultural education for the very young. A mélange of arguments are given in this regard, primarily stressing the positive effects and impacts of this type of education. If arts and cultural education is considered important because it leads to specific valuable outcomes, it is important to have a clear overview of what these outcomes are. Often this type of overview is missing. In this paper we analyze different types of effects that arts and cultural education can lead to and we categorize those effects. Subsequently, we focus on the function of these effects within a broader discourse that advocates arts and cultural education for the very young (0–6 years). Our analysis shows that research does not pay equal attention to all types of effects, but also that the over-emphasis on one type of effects (e. g. personal effects, extrinsic effects) can divert attention from other important effects (e. g. social effects, intrinsic effects). We also show that despite the claims that effect research makes, the implementation of that research in an impact narrative can still go in different and even opposite directions.

Keywords: *arts education, cultural education, effects, early childhood.*

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Introduction

You may hear them in schools, read them in manifestos, find them in policy documents: the many different arguments emphasizing the importance of arts and cultural education. When positive words are spoken about arts and cultural education, these words often refer to the specific effects that this type of education has, as well as to the social significance or impact of those effects. In the public discourse on the benefits of arts and cultural education, however, different types of effects and forms of impact are often mixed together. In this article we try to clarify the different types that exist, with the intention of structuring the future debate more clearly and thus providing a framework for examining which effects and impacts do or do not provide a basis to legitimate arts and cultural education.

Aim, methods and structure

In order to outline a typology of effects and impacts, we explore what types of effects are described in the research literature. We look for the main trends in that body of research and illustrate these trends with references to specific studies. We focus on the empirical research about children of age six or younger because, recently, the importance of arts and cultural education for this age group has come to the attention of researchers. Policy makers often refer to their research to emphasize the importance of an early introduction to arts and culture. For this paper we use existing empirical research without introducing new research data. We do, however, critically examine the existing strand of effect and impact research.

This article consists of two parts. In the first part, we review the existing research with a view to drawing up a typology of effects and impacts. In the second part we zoom out and examine how these effects can be approached. By means of three word pairs (dichotomies) we show how traced effects and impacts can be embedded in a particular narrative about arts and cultural education.

Towards a typology of effects and impacts of arts and cultural education

Personal effects and impacts

The notions of “impact” and “effect” are closely related and are often used together or in an interchangeable way, for instance in the “Effect and Impact Tracking Matrix for Arts Education” [Bamford & Glinkowski 2010]. However, they are not exact synonyms. The impact of an action or phenomenon is the influence that action or phenomenon has (in the short or long term) on society. We use the term “effect” to refer to an outcome that can be attributed to a specific intervention. Thus, the term “impact” has a broader scope than “effect”. The word “effect” is mainly used to refer to a correlation between an educational intervention and a specific measurable

outcome. Let us have a look at different types of effects in research on arts and cultural education.

The first type of effects of arts and cultural education that is often highlighted in research and policy documents on education are so-called *personal* effects. Considerable scientific research suggests that arts and cultural education has or can have effects on the learning individual. These personal effects include cognitive and metacognitive skills, sensory capabilities, creativity and imagination, motor skills, aesthetic judgement, but also enhanced personal well-being and the experience of pleasure, the reduction of stress and the enhancement of positive emotions, physical and health effects, personal engagement and a stronger connection with the direct environment, feelings of tolerance and respect for dissenting opinions and visions, and so on. The list is long. These are all positive aspects – research into the possible negative effects or impacts of arts and cultural education is practically non-existent – that can be acquired by an individual through an educational process related to arts and culture.

If we take a closer look at the list, we see that some of the effects are specific to arts and cultural education. They are typical for this type of learning process in the sense that the outcomes are directly and inextricably linked to it. In other words, they cannot be realized in any other way, for example, through other forms of education (e. g. language teaching). Scholars generally refer to this as the *intrinsic* effects of arts and cultural education [e. g. Winner et al. 2013]. In many cases (but not always) the intrinsic effect itself also belongs to the same artistic or cultural domain as the educational intervention. For example, the development of specific artistic skills, such as singing skills like tonality, vocal range or musical improvisation skills as an outcome of vocal instruction among young children [Guilbault 2004, Hornbach et al. 2005, Klinger et al. 1998, Rutkowski 1996]. In these examples the outcomes are situated within the artistic sphere of one specific art form, in this case music, the educational intervention is therefore labeled *education in the arts* [Bamford 2006]. But intrinsic personal effects may just as well be about broader artistic or cultural outcomes that are not confined to the domain of a single art form. For example, there are indications that teaching drama and sociodramatic playing techniques have a positive influence on children's creative skills, not only theatrical creativity but also verbal and graphic creativity [Garaigordobil & Berruenco 2011, Komarik & Brutenicova 2003, Yeh & Li 2008].

Other personal effects are not intrinsic, which means they can just as well be realized in another way. One example is the use of artistic imagery to enhance verbal, and more specifically, conversational skills in toddlers and preschoolers [Chang & Cress 2013, Eckhoff 2013, Iorio 2006, Korn-Bursztyn 2002, Otto 2008].

Conversations about art between children and adults, and especially one-on-one conversations, appear to be very effective. These artistic images are an interesting tool but not a *condition sine qua non* for the effect itself. After all, conversational skills can also be trained without these images. In general, scholarly publications refer to this as *extrinsic* effects. When artistic images are, like in this example, primarily used to train conversational skills, an outcome outside the artistic sphere, this can be labeled *education through the arts* [Bamford 2006].

Social effects

In addition to the impact on the individual (all people individually) arts and cultural education or participation can also have effects at the social or societal level (the interaction between individuals and between groups). For example, research claims that arts and cultural education benefits the parent-child relationship, but also social cohesion, community identity, a culture of inclusion, and even economic growth.

The list is once again long and once again concerns both effects that may be typical of arts and cultural education (*intrinsic* effects) and effects that can also be realized through other educational interventions that are not about arts and culture (*extrinsic* effects). One example is the proven correlation between music education and musical participation on the one hand, and social playing behavior and collaboration in carrying out assignments on the other [Gerry et al. 2012; Kirschner & Tomasello 2009, 2010; Nicholson et al. 2008; Walworth 2009]. This correlation shows that music education and participation can indeed have *extrinsic social effects*.

Again, some social effects fall within the artistic and cultural domain, others lie outside that domain. As social effects or outcomes are often broad and spread out

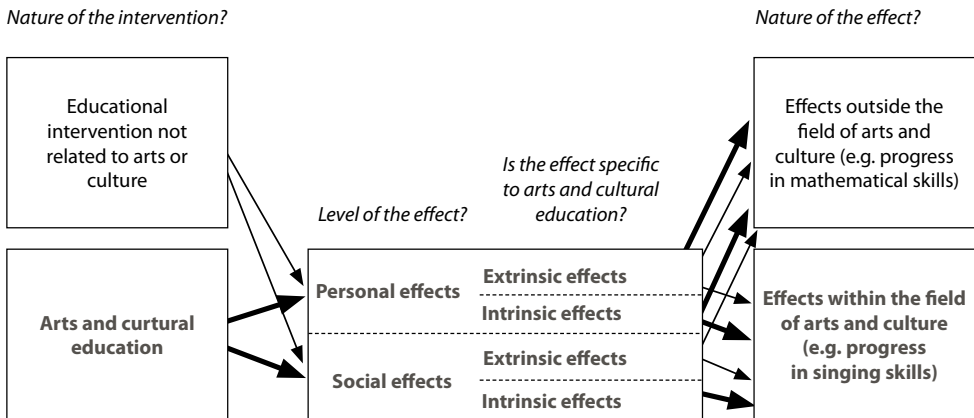


Figure 1. Typology of effects of arts and cultural education.

over various domains, it often makes more sense to refer to them as the social or societal “impact” of arts and cultural education. After all, all the social effects together answer the question of how arts and cultural education really influence society.

Three reflections on effect and impact research in arts and cultural education

Within each one of the above-mentioned categories (*personal/social, extrinsic/intrinsic, outcomes within/outside the field of arts and culture*) effect claims are formulated [Vermeersch et al. 2018]. The question remains as to whether they can all be proven scientifically. Research shows that a vast number of these effects can indeed be substantiated theoretically or empirically [for an overview see: Bamford 2006, Gielen et al. 2014, Harland & Hetland 2008, Vermeersch et al. 2018, Winner et al. 2013]. However, there are also assumptions that have not yet been sufficiently studied. Furthermore, some claims are based on no more than personal experience and anecdotes, speculation, wishful thinking, or even the self-interest of the person or body formulating the claim.

When we look at the scholarly literature on arts and cultural education, again especially studies related to the very young, we can make three general observations.

First of all, we notice that the existing empirical research pays more attention to the *personal* effects of arts and cultural education than to the *social* effects. One might assume that personal effects are easier to investigate in an empirical way as this type of research is mostly a matter of correlating specific interventions to specific consequences. But a sharp focus on the establishment of a list of individual outcomes may, however, take away the attention from the broader social impact of this type of education. In addition, we must approach the very search for direct personal effects of arts and cultural education critically. Real arts and cultural education never takes place in the isolated context of a (semi-)experimental study. This implies that when examining the benefits of arts and cultural education among young people, it must be taken into account that these young people are receiving a lot of artistic and cultural stimuli all through the day. As a consequence, it is often impossible to measure the net effect of an educational intervention and thus isolate the specific cause (of an effect) from other mediating variables.

Secondly, we observe an *instrumental bias* in the current body of research. Artistic and cultural educational processes are often approached in terms of what they can mean for developmental fields *beyond* the purely artistic and cultural. Especially Anglo-Saxon scholars seem to consider the study of the impact of arts and cultural education on cognitive-academic performance a priority [e. g. Winner

& Hetland 2000, Winner et al. 2013]. That is remarkable because many hypotheses regarding effects of arts and cultural education that lie outside the domain of arts and culture are rather improbable. A classic example of this is the so-called “Mozart effect”, a putative effect based on an experiment conducted in 1991. It claimed that listening to a specific Mozart piano sonata has an IQ-increasing effect. The study itself, however, did not mention any increase in intelligence in general but a small element of it (spatial reasoning) [Rauscher et al. 1993]. Follow-up and replica studies showed that the effect was of very short duration (10 to 15 minutes) and that it could also be observed with other pieces of music by other composers, and even with music by the pop group “Blur” [Schellenberg & Hallam 2005]. An important reason why the “Mozart effect”, like many other supposed extrinsic effects, did not really pass the empirical test, is that the nature of the activity (listening to classical music) and the nature of the supposed effect (increased intelligence) lie miles apart. If there is any relationship between the two, it is a so-called *far transfer* effect and this type of effect is rarely substantiated in effect research in education [Keinanen et al. 2000, Moga et al. 2000, Harland & Hetland 2008, Winner & Hetland 2000]. After all, you don’t build arm muscles by doing leg exercises. But even in the rare cases where this would work, the question remains whether far transfer effects are useful for education. After all, no effect research is needed to ascertain that many cognitive-academic accomplishments can also be achieved, probably better and faster, through other educational paths [Eisner 2002]. Take, for example, the discussion on the effect of music education and musical participation on mathematical reasoning. Some researchers argue that music practice and participation can promote the development of mathematical skills in young children because music has some inherently mathematical qualities, such as proportions and rhythmic patterns [Geist et al. 2012, Hallam 2010, Vaughn, 2000]. However, other researchers question this effect [e. g. Mehr et al. 2013, Winner & Hetland 2000]. Regardless of who is right, the hypothesis itself remains of little relevance, let alone useful for the field of music education, because it simply makes more sense to train mathematical skills through math lessons. So even when this type of effects outside the artistic or cultural domain can be identified, it does not offer a real basis to legitimate or advocate arts and cultural education¹. And the reverse is also true: if these effects cannot be verified, this does not mean that the effects within the domain of arts and culture automatically gain more credibility [Catteral 2000].

Thirdly, the general research interest in how arts and cultural education lead to benefits outside the area of arts and culture automatically leads to a heightened interest

¹ That doesn’t mean that we exclude the possibility that it might be nice to use music in a math class, but this is best done for reasons that are less directly related to academic performance (such as increasing motivation or for the pleasure one gets from it).

in the extrinsic effects of arts and cultural education. Because of this interest, effect research seems to look down on possible intrinsic effects. After all, it demonstrates little respect for arts and culture to use it merely as a means to pursue certain effects that can also be achieved by other forms of education. Elliot Eisner warned about this over twenty years ago: “*When such contributions [to other academic fields] become priorities, the arts become handmaidens to ends that are not distinctively artistic and, in the process, undermine the value of the arts’ unique contributions to the education of the young*” [Eisner 1998: 49].

Not only arts and culture itself could suffer from overemphasizing extrinsic effects. Stressing the “instrumental character” of arts and cultural education could have social consequences as well, especially when talking about the very young. Correlating early arts and cultural education to (later) academic performance can result in an impact discourse in which this type of education can actually no longer be questioned. This may be good for the justification of arts and cultural education, but at the same time it can make artistic and cultural (learning) activities part of the implicit norm of what is “good parenting”. Some parents will meet this norm without any problem, while others will feel, or will be talked into feeling, that they are failing. This leads to the external attribution of an extra task they have to fulfill and possibly also to the culpabilization of parents who are not able to fulfill this task. Vandebroek and Peeters call this the “tyranny of the consensus” [2014: 153]. They state: “*The problem is that the choices (of what is desirable) remain implicit, uncontested and presented as evident, rather than as a choice amidst other possibilities*” [2014:155].

Young children learning in and through arts and culture: different approaches

So far, we have analyzed and categorized the effects of arts and cultural education, we also criticized the current trends in effect and impact research in the field of arts and cultural education. In this last section of this paper, we now focus on the implications of the (research on) effects and impacts of arts and cultural education on how to approach this type of education. For this purpose, we will distance ourselves from the research itself and examine how different narratives develop in relation to arts and cultural education. We will do this through three dichotomies.

Right vs. must

Guided by the knowledge about or simply the trust in the (added) value and positive effects and impacts, organizations or policy bodies may support arts and cultural education. Exactly how they will do this, however, may vary. By “how” we

do not mean the working methods that are applied, these can of course also be very different, but rather the way they approach the young child.

A common approach is the so-called *rights approach*. This perspective is based on the premise that every human being, and therefore also every child, has the right to arts and culture. This is a fundamental social right, a right that everyone can invoke and that is inalienable. This perspective is not only propagated today by theorists such as Martha Nussbaum [2007] but is also ingrained in many international policy guidelines and legislation, both hard and soft law. Perhaps the best known examples are the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (1959) followed by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (entered into force in 1990). The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that: “(..) *Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits*” (art. 27). The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* stipulates that the states must “(..) *respect and promote the right to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity*” (art. 31). These are powerful stipulations that are also interesting to indicate that a rights approach covers different perspectives. The word “freely” in the first quote emphasizes that every human being should be able to take up the right to arts and culture, but the use of that right is not compulsory. The second quote emphasizes that a right is not just a given, but something that has to be persistently and actively put into practice, by the individual at the micro-level but also by organizations at a meso-level and policy bodies at a macro-level creating the right opportunities for all individuals. Thus, within the rights approach different nuances are possible.

In addition to, or even in opposition to, the rights discourse, a more imperative discourse is sometimes used. Applying this approach implies arts and cultural education is not a right but rather “a must”. A central government that sets specific objectives related to arts and cultural education in a compulsory curriculum (e. g. curriculum goals in pre-primary education), is an example of such an approach. Adding arts and cultural education to the compulsory curriculum reflects the belief that an individual cannot and should not go without it. Things can of course be made compulsory in various ways, not only through a curriculum. It can be done explicitly (for example, by including it in regulations) or it can be done more implicitly (via, for example, social norms, social pressure or symbolic authority).

Merit vs. instrument

Whether you see arts and cultural education as a right or a must is strongly related to the exact *use* of arts and culture. The rights approach implicitly assumes

that arts and culture are things that everyone should be able to access, without having to do anything in return. According to international declarations, everyone has this right, simply because they are human beings. Consequently, arts and culture are not something that someone has to “earn”, for example, by showing exemplary behavior or by certain accomplishments, or by making certain investments. Nevertheless, such a merit-based approach exists. It often shows itself in financial terms: arts and cultural participation or education are the “return” that individuals receive when they buy an entry ticket or pay a registration fee. Those who do not pay are not offered access. We could also call this a *quid quo pro* line of reasoning. Incidentally, this does not always have to involve financial resources. This approach is observable in a classroom when, for instance, a teacher organizes a field trip or sets up an art project as a “reward” for the good behavior of the pupils. Clearly, this approach deviates from the basic idea that everyone, no matter what, has a right to culture.

Some also consider arts or culture “instruments” or specific means to accomplish something. As we mentioned earlier, the basic idea of an instrumental approach is that arts and cultural education is especially important, and therefore worth stimulating, because “it is good for something”. This can relate to the effects or impacts of the educational process, but just as well to the educational interaction with the children. For example, a cultural trip can be a way to take the children outside the (pre)school walls to make them calmer or to enhance their enthusiasm.

Domain-specific vs. holistic

A third dimension that we want to add to the “how”-question concerns the view on the child growing up. It is possible to look at all the domains of the child’s development separately. Artistic and cultural development then becomes one domain alongside many others, including physical development, ethical development, literacy and numeracy development, etc. The child is the sum of all these domains. Such an *aggregative* approach to the child’s development has the advantage that the domains of learning and life can be stimulated and studied separately. This usually results in attention to the typical or domain-specific characteristics of these separate domains. In many cases, effect and impact studies build on this logic because they assume that the effects and impacts of arts and cultural education can be isolated from other non-arts or non-cultural educational interventions. This, however, ignores the fact that the different domains of human development are strongly intertwined and can therefore hardly be functionally separated, let alone the idea that this separation would be desirable in a pedagogical sense. We should be aware that there is some overlap and spill-over between the personal and social effects, between the intrinsic and extrinsic and the effects within and outside the domain of art and culture. That is why arts and cultural education with the very young

often deliberately transcends subjects and domains. The content of the education is integrated in various ways (themes, methods, etc.) and developmental domains are consciously linked together; but even then, the concept of domains that can be defined separately remains intact.

In contrast to the domain-specific or aggregative perspective of the child is the holistic or purely integrative approach. This approach does not “divide” the child into separate or intertwined domains, characteristics, interests, clusters of behaviors, etc., but looks at the child as a whole. This also assumes that the different domains of learning constantly interact with each other. The whole is not the sum of its parts, but more than that. This vision also places the development of the child in broader contexts, such as those of the family, the peers, the (class) group, etc., which play an important role in both the care process and the educational process of the young child. From this perspective, education and care are inextricably linked.

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to bring clarity to the debate about the effects and impacts of arts and cultural education. We have not compiled a list of the (many) proven effects and impacts but defined and classified them according to a number of dimensions (personal/social, intrinsic/extrinsic, outcomes within/outside the domain of arts and culture). We have illustrated this with references to the growing body of research literature on the benefits of arts and cultural education for the very young (0y–6y). The typology in this article allowed us to look critically at the existing effect and impact research. Among other things, we raised questions about the instrumental bias in the existing body of research and the over-emphasis on the personal effects of arts and cultural education. For that reason, we zoomed out at the end of this article to look at how effect-based advocacy for arts and cultural education can be fitted into a broader impact narrative. From our analysis we learn that even those who emphasize the positive effects and impacts of arts and cultural education still have several options for building a narrative pro arts and cultural education.

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