

## INTRODUCTION

The world is facing manifold challenges, such as those arising from demographic change, globalisation, climate changes, emergent security threats and swift technological change, not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these are putting the well-being of citizens and communities under strain, providing fertile ground for rising tensions between people and societies.

The choice of the thematic focus for this special volume of *Culture Crossroads* is prompted by the turmoil experienced by people and societies, and the contributions that high quality arts and cultural education can make to address these current concerns.

In the last two decades, considerable evidence has been accumulated on the multiple benefits of arts and cultural education for children, young people and adults – contributing to their innovation capacity, creativity, collaboration and critical thinking skills, improving mental health of individuals, cohesion of communities and more. Arts and cultural education is increasingly discussed not only in terms of intrinsically valuable personal development of individuals, but as a broader societal issue, e. g. of social justice: as a right to equal access to opportunities vital for life and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, access to high quality arts and cultural education differs across countries. It is precisely that part of the education system, which tends to suffer cuts whenever political decisions have to be made on resource allocation. Therefore it is critical that scholars, makers of educational and cultural policy and practitioners constantly revisit the role of arts and cultural education, seeking the strongest arguments based on knowledge about the impact of the field for its further development. It is necessary to highlight tools that enable equal access to its opportunities, and content that furthers the attainment of goals that are vital to individuals and societies, as well as effective ways of communicating the outcomes of arts and cultural education to the relevant stakeholders.

This volume, with geographically and thematically diverse papers is contributing to cast light on some of these issues.

Each of the authors in this volume has addressed a unique and noteworthy dimension of arts/cultural education.

The first paper, by **Lode Vermeersch and Evelien Storme**, entitled “Arts and Cultural Education during Early Childhood: a Critical Analysis of Effects and Impacts” invites the reader to consider different types of effects that arts/cultural education can lead to. The authors categorize those effects and discuss the function of these effects within a broader discourse that advocates for arts/cultural education for the very young (0–6 years).

The paper “Resilience in an Embodied Perspective: The Impact of Integrated Arts Education on Experiences of South African Primary School Children Post COVID-19 Lockdown” by **Charlotte Svendler Nielsen, Liesl Hartman, Fabian Hartzenberg and Gerard M. Samuel** presents the analysis of the manifold impacts of integrating dance and visual arts in education to support resilience among primary school children in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The authors discuss what it means to include an embodied perspective in a theoretical understanding of the notion of resilience, and the importance it might have to implement this perspective to guide educational practice.

The contribution by **Aron Weigl** “On the Impact of Evaluation. Applied Research on Arts Education Programmes as a Tool for Development” brings the reader into the domain of the impact of evaluation and the creation of an added-value for the practice of arts education. The paper analyses two examples of programmes evaluated by an independent research institute, and the role of implementing a co-creative research design, defining advantages and challenges of this approach.

**Egge Kulbok-Lattik and Anneli Saro** present the paper entitled “The Terms, Position and Problems of Hobby Education in Estonia” in which the authors address the issue of hobby education (which includes arts and cultural education), its status and organization during different political eras in Estonia. The article discusses the discrepancy between the current positioning of hobby education as a part of youth work and the much broader impact of hobby education on the population (e. g. developing national and local identities). The analysis also addresses the unequal institutional conditions for the development of hobby education.

Finally, yet importantly **Guna Spurava, Sirkku Kotilainen, Baiba Holma** in their paper “The Role and Readiness of Librarians in Promoting Digital Literacy: A Case Study from Latvia” focus on the vital crosscutting theme of digital literacy as a precondition of learning in nowadays education. The paper discusses the interpretations and practices of librarians of public libraries as mediators of digital literacy for young people.

Taken as a whole, these papers present an insight into the many aspects of impact produced by arts and cultural education, the processes contributing to this impact, and the institutions involved. Each paper highlights a significant facet of the important scene of arts and cultural education as an endeavour as topical now as ever.

The international team of co-editors extends sincere gratitude to all the authors who contributed during this challenging time in order to make this collection possible. May each of the papers find their committed and enthusiastic readers, and serve as encouragement for further research on the issues presented in the volume.

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