Marking time in Pacific Schools: Does Art only meet Academia in the halls?

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From the smallest coastal schools to the larger urban central schools, children and teachers across Oceania are keeping time. They collectively march to the tune of the examination drum. The examination-focussed, content-driven system is not a new phenomenon. It is a beast that is well known to educators and teachers throughout the region. In this climate, the only real assured outcome is rote-learning and regurgitation of facts and figures during tests and major exams.

Due to the deep entrenchment of the certification mentality, areas of study such as Values and Physical education, Music, Art, and Vernacular are sidelined despite the fact that these areas are known to contribute to the holistic development of the child.

When we ask students what they want to do when they leave school their answers are consistent regardless of their location. The majority want to take up white collar jobs based in medicine, the law and accountancy. Fewer children aspire to jobs in engineering, firefighting or the police force; and fewer still consider career paths as actors, dancers, singers, writers or artists.

It is argued that this view is a result of educational conditioning from the Colonial period and cultural notions of art. Education, for the most part, has emphasised and prioritised academic learning and rewarded academically oriented students. In addition, cultural notions of art, values the aesthetic beauty of functional artifacts like traditional spears, the fine mat, the tapa or traditional dance. The production of art for art’s sake remains insignificant as it is not seen as a valid form of employment and because the school serves the economic schema of employment over cultural or spiritual agendas.

The arts are extremely significant to the holistic development of the child for the following reasons:

- They allow children to appreciate beauty and to express themselves in constructive and critical ways. Studies argue that creative thinking is significant to the development of critical thinking enabling children to pose new ways of addressing old problems in new innovative ways.

- They provide an option for talented early school leavers. The Fiji Prisons Yellow Ribbon Project launched this year in Fiji is a testimony to the value and success of the arts in developing creative skills as a part of the rehabilitation process of inmates in Fiji Prisons.
Studies show that students who engage in the arts perform better academically. Psychologists argue that this is because it enables a full growth of the brain in terms of left-brain and right-brain development.

Art as an aesthetic experience has proven particularly beneficial to students with learning difficulties such as ADD, dyslexia, and those suffering from emotional problems.

Despite the wide publication of such findings, art in the form of painting, drawing, dancing and singing is seen as most appropriate from pre-school to classes 4 or 5. By class six, children are noticeably directed towards the examinations which will qualify them for secondary school entrance.

Students in these classes are often taken through a series of craft making exercises including leaf painting, paper cutting and pasting, string work, finger painting and the least demanding coloring activity.

Other art forms such as creative writing, traditional story telling, and Pacific fashion design, or the foundational skills in drawing and painting fall under the radar. It may be argued that at art at secondary school could be explored for their value as social commentary or as a teaching tool for community based initiatives. Non-government organisations like ‘Wan Smol Bag Theatre’ of Vanuatu or the Women’s Action for Change Theatre Group in Fiji are testimony to this.

As a young teacher, I was asked to teach art at secondary school level, albeit without a curriculum, department plan or basic art stocks. Art classes taught by my predecessors were predominantly western-oriented. The majority of the art forms and mediums used prioritised craft-making and I was expected to follow suit. Additionally, Science and Maths teachers would seek permission to replace my art classes, physical education and religion sessions with remedial classes or examination revision. This attitude was reflected in department and school heads. Art was, and is, predominantly seen as a luxury subject - a time-filler or fun area.

Many years on, my travels as a teacher-educator have taken me through various Ministries of Education, schools and conversations with teachers from Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands. Teachers there say the same thing. There is no time for art; there are no resources and no political or administrative will to promote the arts in schools.

However small but significant changes are starting to occur within the school curricula. For example in Fiji, PEMAC is the cumulative approach to Physical Education, Music and Arts and Crafts. The English literature syllabus includes creative writing. The Curriculum Development Unit in Fiji is currently compiling a comprehensive Art curriculum for primary schools.

Thanks to various PRIDE$^2$ project initiatives, the Cook Islands has started to emphasise traditional and contemporary arts. The development of a Visual Arts curriculum for both primary and secondary school is underway in Samoa.

These are exciting markers as they indicate a paradigm shift towards new conceptions of holistic and meaningful learning for Pacific children inclusive of the art experience. Note however that these initiatives focus primarily on visual arts and crafts and exclude creative writing or theatre, dance and music.

Teachers are so tightly bound to the requirements of the content-full syllabus that there is a tendency to rush through prescribed literature texts, followed by an in-depth guided analysis of these. Writing skills are far too often confined to letter writing, expository writing and journal writing. Creative writing tends to fall within the narrow parameters of personal or descriptive writing.

The art of poetry, drama, or short story writing is left to the child’s discretion. The link between reading, analysis and writing remains for the most part unexplored and talent in these areas are generally untapped. It is left to the exceptional few teachers who are keen writers and readers to engage their students in creative writing initiatives.

I envision Pacific schools as places of great creativity as well as critical thinking. I wish for students who have a love for reading as reading well is the first step to writing well. I wish for students who enjoy art, looking, observing and seeing art all around them; because seeing is one step closer to trying or wanting to try. I would like one day to see classrooms that are not only filled with the bare essentials but also with the art works and creative works of our children displayed on the walls.

However, the reality is stark. Until our peoples demand from our leaders, a respect for the value and worth of the arts to our cultural life and to development, the arts will always remain on the peripheries of developmental models. Until the arts are given priority, educational and employment opportunities in these areas will remain unexploited and art will continue to meet academia in only colorful hallways stopping short at the classroom door.

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1 Art is here used inclusively to include both contemporary as well as traditional art forms. It may refer to the visual arts, creative writing, performance, music, dance, as well as traditional crafts.
2 Pacific Regional Initiatives in the Delivery of Basic Education see [http://www.usp.ac.fj/Pride](http://www.usp.ac.fj/Pride)