CULTURAL LEARNING ALLIANCE BRIEFING

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THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF ARTS EDUCATION FOR INCLUSION

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UNESCO sees inclusion as integral to children's rights to education:

> *"The right to education aims to ensure everyone achieves their human right to access quality education throughout life. An inclusive approach to education means that each individual's needs are taken into account and that all learners participate and achieve together. It acknowledges that all children can learn and that every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs. Special focus is placed on learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement. For example, where a child has a disability he or she would not be separated from other learners in school and learning assessments and progress would take the disability into account."*[1]

This UNESCO statement clearly indicates that inclusion is a crucial underpinning for Arts and cultural education.

CLA conducted a brief scoping review to identify evidence which addressed the relationship between the Arts and inclusion.

Understanding Inclusion

Inclusion in education is a complex concept. The literatures are clear that inclusion refers to all children and young people. Inclusive practitioners work with intersectionaility (Crenshaw, 1989), that is, the understanding that different aspects of a person's social identity (e.g. race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, religion) do not operate separately but overlap and interact to shape individual experiences. Each of those differences matters; but the combination matters more. Intersectionality insists that we resist treating any single category as the whole story. Being inclusive means asking whose cultural references are centred in arts teaching, whose bodies and stories are represented in the repertoire, and who gets positioned as a future arts practitioner. It also means noticing that students who are marginalised on multiple dimensions at once may be least visible in data, least served by single-issue interventions, and most likely to disengage. Intersectionality concerns the interaction between categories, not just their addition. The point is not that race plus gender plus class equals disadvantage, but that these systems of power shape each other and produce effects that cannot be read off from any one of them alone.

[1] https://www.unesco.org/en/inclusion-education/need-know

Inclusion is always in process. Inclusion is fundamentally about ongoing change, and change that is directed to institutions and practices, not children and young people themselves (Allen, 2003; Downes, Li, Van Praag, & Lamb, 2024; Gale & Densmore, 2000; Slee, 2011). Inclusion is sometimes framed as helping particular young people fit into existing arts institutions and programmes by building their confidence, developing their skills and removing the personal obstacles that keep them away. This framing locates the problem in the individual. A more substantive account of inclusion starts from the opposite premise: that institutions and practices are themselves the problem, shaped by histories and assumptions that have systematically privileged some young people and marginalised others. From this perspective, inclusion requires changing what is taught and how, who gets to define quality and taste, what counts as legitimate artistic practice, and whose cultural references are treated as the default and so on. It means examining recruitment pipelines, hiring practices, governance structures, and funding criteria, not just outreach programmes. Young people do not need to be fixed or prepared to enter a world that remains unchanged; institutions, gatekeepers and inherited hierarchies need to change.

Inclusion Means Change

Research literatures draw attention to the challenge of practices derived from particular language categories. The continued use of deficit discourse may mean that, despite inclusive policies, many education systems struggle to move beyond the mechanics of integration (Graham and Jahnukainen 2011) Patel and Wells' (2022) call for a shift from reactive diversity initiatives to proactive, justice-oriented practices embedded in the foundation of arts education.). However, Lynch and Allan (2007) point to the challenges teachers face in implementing arts-based social inclusion, including policy changes, curriculum demands, and the need to demonstrate expertise. They caution against simply targeting marginalised groups, as this may inadvertently reinforce divisions, instead suggesting the creation of "smooth spaces" where traditional hierarchies are blurred.

The terms access and integration are sometimes used interchangeably with inclusion, but they describe something more limited. Access is about getting young people through the door: removing logistical barriers like cost, transport, or timetabling so that arts opportunities are reachable in principle. Integration is about absorbing newcomers into existing structures, helping them take part in something already designed and already running. Both matter, but neither touches the deeper question of what young people find when they arrive, or whether the institution has changed anything about itself to receive them. A young person can have full access to a programme and be fully integrated into its activities while still experiencing it as alien to their life, their culture, and their sense of who they are. Inclusion that stops at access and integration leaves the institution intact and places the entire burden of adjustment on the young person.

The concept of participation points elsewhere. To participate is not merely to attend or to be accommodated but to have a genuine stake in what happens. To participate means to contribute, to shape, to belong in a way that is recognised and reciprocated. Thinking in terms of participation shifts attention from whether young people can get to arts provision to whether arts provision is meaningful and responsive to them. It raises questions about voice and agency: are young people involved in making decisions about programming, not just receiving what has been decided for them? Are their own cultural practices taken seriously as artistic practice, rather than treated as raw material to be refined by professional standards? Participation-oriented thinking tends to produce

different institutional practices such as co-design, community-led programming, ongoing relationship rather than one-off engagement. These practices start from young people's lives rather than from the institution's offer.

In practice, inclusion as meaningful participation always means directly addressing deficit labels and categories as well as limited practices such as those directed to access and integration (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 1997). For example:

- Wexler (2016) argues for a shift to recognise disability as a product of social and political networks rather than an individual phenomenon. This means both focusing on altering the mainstream environment rather than forcing students to adapt as well as considering physical and sensory aspects of learning environments to create richer experiences for all (Wexler and Luethi-Garrecht 2015)
- Tillborg (2020) identifies tensions between "multicentric inclusion" and specialised approaches, suggesting a need to reconcile these apparently contradictory practices and
- Keifer-Boyd et al. (2018) argues that the language of "inclusionism" can maintain existing power structures rather than transform them.

There are also resources to support thinking about change. Qvortrup and Qvortrup's (2017) inclusion framework identifies three dimensions of inclusion: different levels of inclusion; the types of social communities that children might belong to; and degrees of inclusion that children experience in various settings. Kantawala (2023) argues that arts educators can demonstrate "creative resilience" by innovating and adapting to challenges, viewing diversity not as a checkbox exercise but as a crucial element in creating meaningful impact.

Arts Education's Inclusive Values

The fundamental inclusivity of arts education stems from a set of core values that position the arts as inherently accessible to all children. These values create a distinctive foundation that sets arts education apart from other curriculum areas. Core values include the belief that:

(1) "Every child is an artist" (Hall & Thomson, 2017b; Hay, 2023; Tan & Gibson, 2020)

Examples in the literatures include Crystal's (2020) argument that diversity and inclusion work together to open up a range of possibilities for arts organisations and educational settings alike, and Henderson and Lasley's (2014) emphasis on a "can do" attitude in early years Arts education. Because of the emphasis on becoming and being an artist, expressive Arts teachers have to become highly skilled at understanding each pupil's interests, strengths and areas for further development – their "funds of knowledge and identity". This generally involves teachers engaging in purposeful dialogue and building relationships: students often comment on the specific quality of the relationships that they have with their Arts teachers. Some students see the Arts rooms as sanctuaries from the rest of the school, a place where they can "be themselves". (Thomson & Hall, 2021)

(2) "Every child has good ideas" (Hall & Thomson, 2017a; Thomson & Hall, 2015)

Examples in the literatures include Baker's (2015) reporting of involving young people as "co-portraitists" in community Arts projects (democratising knowledge production) and Ketovuori and

Ketovuori (2013) on the use of storytelling method which allows children to express their own ideas in their mother tongue.

(3) "Difference is an asset" (Thomson, Hall, Jones, & Sefton Green, 2012)

Examples in the literatures include Alvarez et al.'s (2021) documentation of Arts-based learning practices which promote cognitive and socio-affective competences essential for lifelong learning, while fostering collaborative interactions and wider participation. The European Network of Arts Observatories document annually how culturally responsive Arts education benefits students, as well as society more generally.

(4) "Every child is capable of learning Arts knowledges and skills, albeit in different ways"

Examples in the literature include Garrett and MacGill's (2019) Creative and Body-based Learning (CBL) approach. CBL makes curriculum content accessible through multiple modes of engagement while serving as a critical counter-narrative to traditional didactic teaching, creating "affective intensities" that engage students more deeply in learning while reinvigorating teachers' sense of purpose. Ferrer-Fons et al. (2022) show that non-formal Arts education can create an inclusive environment through emotional connections, flexibility, and adaptation to individual needs, providing access to cultural capital for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Together, these values create what Ferm, Almqvist and Christophersen (2016) describe as a "holistic inclusive view of education" that encourages functional and vivid Arts education for all. They offer five dimensions of inclusion: providing Arts education for all; connecting to something larger; allowing access to different forms of expression; establishing preconditions for holistic inclusion; and developing specialised Arts education.

These underpinning values position Arts teachers and artists to recognise, value and work with the full range of students they encounter and to support a whole-child perspective where personal development and social education are inseparable from subject learning. In turn this supports school cultures which are capacious and convivial for a wide range of students (Bragg & Manchester, 2017).

Arts Pedagogies and Inclusion

The goal of subjects within the Arts domain is to support young people to develop deep understandings as well as to become more and more independent in their practice. Because expressive Arts subjects are geared to support the growth of artists, the curriculum is explicitly structured to encourage and build artistic progress (Thomson & Hall, 2023). Thus, there is both an emphasis on skills development *and* building knowledge about Arts genres, materials, practices and histories across cultures. Progress in the Arts means students taking on more and more ambitious projects by themselves and/or as part of a group (Thomson, Maloy, & Hall, 2023). The independent development of ideas and skills is encouraged through Arts practices such as the extended project which demands considerable self-discipline, and the promotion of reflective self-critical practices, e.g. the use of notebooks/sketchbooks/journals, "crits; and notes" (Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lakrin, 2013). Students are expected to be ambitious and to risk challenging themselves; one of the most common responses of children to researchers' questions about why they find Arts experiences significant is captured in the common response "I didn't think I could do this."

The Arts offer a wide range of ways of exploring realising and communicating understandings and interpretations (Goodlad, Hamilton, & Taylor, 2002). Children and young people who find the dominant modes of teaching and assessment difficult have an expanded repertoire of possible avenues for learning (Franks, Thomson, Hall, & Jones, 2014). When they find success – and enjoyment in that success – in an Arts subject, children and young people are more likely to find school meaningful (Bowen & Kisida, 2021, 2022; Winkley, 2013). Improvements in attendance, school ethos and wellbeing are thus often associated with Arts learning (McLellan, Galton, Steward, & Page, 2012). In particular the Arts provide powerful and diverse avenues for identity exploration and self-expression (van Heusden & Gielen, 2015).

Arts Education for Targeted Groups

Arts education shows particular promise for **students from low socioeconomic backgrounds**. Indicative literatures to evidence this include: Catterall's longitudinal study of showed a significant increase in college attendance for economically challenged students in Arts-rich schools. (Catterall, 2009). Felton et al. (2015) highlight how Arts education's self-reflective and meaning-making characteristics can provoke attitudinal change essential for widening participation among students from low-income backgrounds. Scholes and Nagel (2011) specifically address the potential of creative Arts to engage **working-class boys** who often invest considerable energy in performing masculinities that resist formal schooling. Bux and van Schalkwyk (2022) similarly found worthy outcomes for adolescents in low-income communities participating in structured creative Arts interventions, though they noted the limited research evidence in this area.

Catterall's longitudinal studies of **young people designated as 'at risk'** found far better learning and social outcomes associated with Arts engagement (Catterall, Dumais, & Hampden-Thompson, 2012). Baker's (2015) work on community portrait-making with young people in flexible learning settings demonstrates how photography can democratise knowledge production by involving young people as "co-portraitists." Alternative education provisions often offer Arts subjects and this can significantly reduce disaffection (Finney, Hickman, Morrison, Nicholl, & Rudduck, 2005). Baker (2015) offers a specific example of the use of participatory visual methods to develop community portraits that project the voices of young people in flexible learning settings.

Secker et al. (2007) identified eight distinct processes through which Arts participation benefits **young people with mental health needs**, including motivation, focusing, connecting with others, self-expression, and rebuilding identities. Marie and Bailey (2022) demonstrate how Barrier-Free Theatre programmes can help students regain academic progress while developing social-emotional connections. Birrell et al. (2024) found positive outcomes on children's wellbeing following engagement in Arts-inclusive programmes, suggesting community Arts-based programmes could also be cost-effective options for improving mental health outcomes in vulnerable populations.

There is research on programmes for **students with disabilities**. For example, Boardman and Hovland (2022) finding that project-based learning in language Arts provides opportunities for creativity, expanded worldviews, increased literacy skills, collaboration, and choice in learning. Students with disabilities expressed a desire for scaffolded learning and teachers responsive to individual needs, highlighting the importance of student voice and choice in designing inclusive learning experiences. Østerlie and Jusslin (2024) concur, noting that inclusion and autonomy are

interconnected elements that strengthen each other. Whitehurst and Howells (2006) document a successful music integration project that shifted mainstream pupils' perceptions of children with disabilities through collaborative work. They propose a cyclical process of creating enabling environments for inclusion, where skilled individuals develop positive attitudes, which in turn reinforces the enabling environment. Band et al. (2011) examine performing Arts training opportunities that aim to ensure educational provision doesn't stigmatise individuals or devalue their performance. Collins et al. (2021) identify barriers to social inclusion for students with disabilities, including physical obstacles, attitudinal issues, lack of representation, and limited empowerment opportunities, proposing the APRE framework (Access-Participation-Empowerment-Representation) to address these interconnected challenges.

However, as Addison (2007) warns, the emphasis on personal response in the Arts can inadvertently pressure students to reveal aspects of themselves they may not be comfortable sharing. This is especially relevant for **LGBTQ+ students**, who, as Villalpando (2018) notes, benefit from Arts education that creates safe spaces, affirms their identities, and encourages activism. Penketh (2016) also notes that some students with disabilities are still excluded in art classrooms despite the prevalent use of apparently inclusive Arts pedagogies.

The Arts extend inclusion beyond the classroom into broader community contexts. Literatures include Quayle et al. (2015), which conceptualises community Arts as public pedagogy that contributes to counter-storytelling and the empowerment of Aboriginal participants, contesting exclusionary narratives that inform public memory. Sonn and Baker (2015) propose the concept of "community pedagogies" that challenge oppression and marginalisation through diverse critical epistemological tools, participatory approaches, and relational ethics. Rix (2003) describes how the Tutti Ensemble challenges traditional notions of disability culture by focusing on artistic excellence rather than therapeutic approaches, reframing people with disabilities from recipients of charity to valuable contributors to society. Museums offer another important setting for Arts inclusion. Gigerl et al. (2022) highlight the collaboration between schools and museums for inclusive cultural education, noting both progress and persistent challenges like inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, and lack of specialised training. Students in the study emphasised the need for more interactive activities, improved accessibility, and better communication systems.

The Arts may also be helpful in addressing trauma and recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges for inclusion. Marie and Bailey (2022) highlight concerns that both academic and social-emotional skills would deteriorate during lockdowns. They argue that the Arts, which encompass cognitive, emotional, social, and physical aspects, were key to addressing the transition back to the "new normal," particularly through Barrier-Free Theatre programmes integrating drama, music, dance, art, and creative writing. Art therapy approaches offer additional dimensions to inclusion. For example, Hannigan et al. (2019) argue for an "emotional curriculum" incorporating Arts therapy to provide safe spaces for all students to express themselves and to counter discrimination

Teacher Education and Professional Development in Arts and Inclusion

The role of teacher education in fostering inclusive Arts education receives considerable attention in the literatures. Begeske et al. (2021) found that while all ITT programmes offer courses related to special education, exposure to students with disabilities in field experiences is limited, and

collaboration between Arts teachers and special education professionals is not encouraged. Paris et al. (2018) revealed a disconnect between pre-service teachers' theoretical knowledge of inclusive education and their practical application, though interestingly, the collaborative nature of Arts experiences seemed to foster inclusion regardless of teachers' specific actions. Moreno et al. (2019) evaluated a training course for professionals working with students with special needs, finding that participants valued practical, hands-on experiences but identified the need for longer and more specialised training. Wexler (2016) advocates incorporating first-person disability narratives into teacher education to challenge the dominance of non-disabled perspectives in shaping educational practices.

Policy Implications and International Perspectives

Arts inclusion policies vary significantly across international contexts. Cheung et al. (2019) writing in Hong Kong stress the importance of policy leadership and financial incentives, arguing that central governments should take a more concerted leadership role in including Arts inclusion policies in national inter-sectoral policies. They note that Arts inclusion policies in Western countries are generally more developed than those in Asian contexts. Wong and Chik (2016) explore the interaction of multiple policies in Hong Kong's primary music classrooms, highlighting insufficient support for inclusive learning in "non-core" subjects like music. Graham and Jahnukainen (2011) compare inclusion policies across New South Wales, Alberta, and Finland, finding that competitive educational environments and categorical funding policies can hinder genuine inclusion, while front-loading support structures produces more equitable outcomes. This aligns with Crystal's (2020) twelve-step model for cultural organisations seeking to increase diversity and inclusion, highlighting the use of sincere invitations, community partnerships, and ongoing education.

The Need for Collaborative Knowledge Sharing – The National Centre

Cheung et al. (2019) emphasise that policy leadership at the national level to include Arts inclusion policies in inter-sectoral approaches and encourage evidence-based research and Gigerl et al. (2022) argue that successful inclusive practices require a systemic approach rather than isolated efforts, stressing the importance of collaborative processes between cultural and educational institutions. Kinder and Harland (2004) say that Arts education could have a higher profile in the social inclusion agenda, given the overlapping effects and effective practices between strategies addressing pupil disaffection and Arts education.

The separation between Arts education and inclusion expertise may well be a significant barrier to maximising the inclusive potential of Arts education. Malley and Silverstein (2014) directly address this disconnect in the US context, highlighting how the fields of Arts education and special education lack opportunities to share resources and information. They propose a dynamic information hub/technical assistance centre and a consortium of stakeholders across Arts education and special education communities represents an important model for bridging this gap. Specifically, they recommend creating "a dynamic information hub/technical assistance centre" and "establishing a consortium of stakeholders across the Arts education and special education communities to advance a national agenda" (Malley & Silverstein, 2014, p. 39).

This recommendation is pertinent to the terms of reference established for the proposed new National Centre for Arts Education in England.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Several authors identify significant research gaps in the literatures on Arts and inclusion. Rumble et al. (2024) found a knowledge gap regarding the effects of visual art participation on young children's social-emotional wellbeing, particularly in non-therapeutic settings. They note that only 8.4% of studies included visual art participation with children aged 0-5 years, calling for more robust research to isolate the intrinsic effects of artmaking from therapeutic scaffolding. Birrell et al. (2024) similarly highlight limitations in research on Arts-inclusive programme is for young children, including low quality of evidence, varying outcome measures, and few high-quality studies focusing on the 0-6 age group. Bux and van Schalkwyk (2022) call for more research on creative Arts interventions for adolescents in adverse contexts.

Conclusion

The evidence presented across these diverse literatures shows that the Arts have an important role in fostering inclusion. The Arts provide multiple pathways for expression, recognition, and achievement that can engage students who might otherwise be marginalised in educational settings. However, realising this potential requires thoughtful policy development, teacher education, and creative approaches that recognise the complexity of inclusion across different dimensions and contexts.

The transformative potential of Arts education for inclusion lies not merely in accommodating difference but in celebrating it as an asset that enriches learning experiences for all students. When implemented thoughtfully, Arts education can create what Thote and Kumar Sen (2019) call "joyful learning" that engages the whole child while promoting academic achievement, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving.

Note

1. This scoping review aimed to find key themes in the literatures related to Arts and inclusion. The literatures used are not comprehensive but indicative of those that address the particular topic.
2. AI was used to make summaries of about half of the corpus that was examined.

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