

8. IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING VISUAL ARTS IN NIGERIAN BASIC EDUCATION SCHOOLS

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Abstract: *The Unesco institute for statistics defines Basic education as a whole range of educational activities taking place in various settings, that aim to meet basic learning needs as defined in the World Declaration on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, 1990). According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) standard, basic education comprises primary education (first stage of basic education) and lower secondary education (second stage). This is the formative stage of education and so extreme care needs be taken in teaching and steering children of this age which most likely would be roughly between five and thirteen years. Most schools do not follow the right way of teaching visual arts in these basic schools especially when they lack the right trained manpower to cope with the subject and so it is the desire of this writer to proffer solutions to this problem in this aspect of basic education. The objective of this research is to compartmentalize and bring to the fore how visual art should be taught at this level of education. The methods of carrying out this research are both pedagogical, descriptive and quasi-survey with a touch of literature review and at the end, it was found out that various classes have their various methods of imparting knowledge of the visual arts on the pupils and students and that teaching of this class is not without its attendant problems. Solutions were proffered, conclusions were drawn and recommendations made.*

Key words: *Basic Education, Teaching, Visual Arts, Methodology, Problems*

1. Introduction

The teaching of visual arts in schools has been going on for a long time; as far as one can remember, visual arts have been a foremost subject in basic schools. A lot of reasons can be adduced to why visual arts should be made compulsory in basic schools as could be seen in this course of this essay. Most basic institutions in Nigeria and elsewhere teach visual arts as a special discipline, visual arts is an expert area and probably requires well-trained and certificated teachers to handle them. Basic education in Nigeria cuts across nine forms namely, Basic 1 to 9 which is primary 1 to Junior Secondary class 3, so informally referred to. It may also cover a wide variety of informal and non-formal public and private activities intended to meet the primary needs of people of all ages. It is important to teach visual art in these classes because it brings brightness and joy to the world and for some pupils, it can shape and define who they are, fuelling their imagination and igniting their creativity.

2. Discussions

Much have been said and written about the deplorable state of visual arts scholarship in Nigerian schools with particular reference to basic schools which includes primary and junior secondary category; the general deterioration in visual arts achievements in examinations is traceable to faulty and ineffective teaching of this subject in schools. It is rather unfortunate that the expected sound foundation

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from the primary schools are faulty, reason partly for lack of qualified, competent and dedicated teachers; the concomitant effect of this is that most pupils graduating to junior secondary from primary can hardly make simple drawings with their pencils and so, when they get into the secondary school, the art teachers finds themselves in a quagmire of starting from the very scratch, not even knowing where to start from.

This situation is not peculiar to visual arts alone as most other subjects falls within this category and so it is the view of this writer that arts should not be seen as an 'extra-curricular activity' but should form an essential part of a creative school ethos. When children are given time to doodle and draw, they develop their imagination and language skills by sharing ideas with each other. Visual arts are a fantastic way for children to express themselves and to learn to value their uniqueness; visual arts form a vibrant, creative industry which is central to any economy; an arts-rich education is crucial to the success of creative business and entrepreneurs.

For starters, it is good to dichotomize between Arts generally and visual arts in specifics. The Arts encompasses visual and performing arts. While performing arts deals with music, drama and acting, performance art and film production, visual arts includes drawing, painting, textile design, graphic design, sculpture, ceramics, metal and fashion design. Various authors and specialists have come up with various ideas and definitions of what art is. The Britannica dictionary defines it as something that is created with imagination and skills that is beautiful or that expresses important ideas or feelings. Generally, art is the creation or expression of beautiful things around us, especially in visual form; Gombrich (2006) has a somewhat philosophically contradictory but thought-provoking view about art which states:

There is no such thing as art. There are only artists. Once these were men who took coloured earth and roughed out the forms of a bison on the wall of a cave; today some buy their paints, and design posters for the hoardings; they did and do many other things. There is no harm in calling all these activities art as long as we keep in mind that such a word may mean very different things in different times and places and as long as we realize that Art with a capital A has no existence. The fundamental effect of Gombrich's assertion is that art is such an imprecise concept and that trying to define it is like asking different persons to describe an elephant.

Art practice, according to Sturken and Cartwright (2001) started in pre-historic times as the cave men expressed in drawings on their cave walls, scenes of their daily hunting expeditions. Suffice it to state here that when God was creating the heavens and the earth, according to the Holy Bible (Genesis 2:18), a time came when He made (Sculpted) man out of clay; this scenario, in the words of Hyatt-Mayor (2012) is probably where the practice of art started and one may not be wrong in saying that in all aspects of art, sculpture is probably the oldest. In the same Holy Bible, Osaigbovo (2016) made allusion regarding how the practice of graffiti probably started in the book of John (8:11), how some persons brought an adulterous woman to Jesus and He told them that those without sin should cast the first stone and he stooped down and scribbled on the ground; this scenario, according to Osaigbovo (2016) was probably where the practice of graffiti started. Visual arts are

a special subject in the sense that some children have the innate ability to create while a lot of them are not and so in the course of this essay, the writer intends to put certain concepts straight.

3. The concept of Art

In a wider perspective, visual arts includes an array of tools, processes and media, whereas the area most people regard as the visual arts includes painting, drawing, sculpture printmaking, and photography. Consequentially, Whelpton (2014) thinks that the most probable basic and general meaning of what art stands for is that art is the expression of someone's creativity and imagination inherent in his or her visions, expressions, emotions and feelings. It could also be referred to as the assertion or functionality of one's creative skills and imagination, especially in an imaging structure such as paintings and drawings; producing artworks to be seen mainly for their aesthetics or expressive power rather than their functionality.

Art cuts across a wide array of human endeavours, works and manners of self-expression, it sometimes include music and theatre. And so, visual arts are seen as some essential part of the human knowledge representing the world and the times we live in. Art helps humans understand their history and culture in such a way that may not be done through other means. Art has also been defined by Philips (2012) as an avenue for the expression or communication of emotions and ideas and as means for expressing and advancing elements for their own sake and as representation. The visual arts therefore, are art forms that are primarily visual such as drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, design, crafts, photography, video, filmmaking and architecture.

Importance of Art

Art, as a specialized area, has a lot of advantages for children and consequently for society in general. According to Emeka (2014), beyond the qualities of creativity, self-expression and communication, art itself is a type of vocation. From time immemorial, artists and artisans have involved themselves in various artistic vocations. From the period of the cave art of Blombos in South Africa and Altamira cave art of Spain and Lascaux in France. (Microsoft Encarta, 2009), Sulawesi cave art of Indonesia (Thompson, 2014) to this present time, people have taken Art in various forms as a means of livelihood. In the words of Freedman (2003), art has always been a global language that is spoken and understood even in other fields of human endeavour.

This assertion of Freedman seems valid in the sense that visual art is part and parcel of most other areas especially the sciences; for instance, in the medical sciences, imaging technology play a prominent role, ceramics and textiles in art are mostly dominated by chemistry especially in the areas of glazing and chemical applications whereas graphics deals with physics in the domain of photography and light. In this era of technological advancement, the use of the computer which has gained grounds in most areas of human endeavour has also become one of the commonest tools in art. The initial conceptualization and visualization of sketches of motor vehicles, airplanes and most household appliances begins at the table of the industrial designer who in most cases are graphic artists.

Medical imaging centres and hospitals need the help of graphic artists in their

imaging departments. The developments of websites, design and advertising, film and television animations are all works of the graphic artist. Sickler-Voigt (2019) avers that art helps in the development of a sound mind, especially in the areas of self-expression; it exposes children to the appreciation of the world they live in by critically studying scenes and drawing them in colourful renditions. Art helps in the psychomotor skill development of the child; with regular exercise of the muscles of the arm through drawing, painting and sculpting, the muscles undergo gradual and symmetrical development.

To the society, art serves as tourism potential to a country that in turn produces foreign earning potentials; and ultimately, since visual art is a part of the human experience, it can help us understand our history and culture. In the same vein, Goldstein (1980) posits that visual arts helps an individual process his emotions and understands his surroundings. He stressed further that art allows one to see life from a different perspective and makes one feel alive. Corroborating this stand, Knobler (2018) stressed that art has always been an important part of human society since time and has been used as tool for cultural exchange, education and expression. Since art is an integral aspect of education, Schofield (2012) outlined the following criteria for education which in turn is a translation into art thus:

1. Education must involve knowledge and understanding and some sort of ‘cognitive perspective’ which is not inert.
2. Education is the transfer of what is meaningful to those who become associated with it, meaning that art is the communication of creativity by practitioners to the society at large.

Judging from the submission of Schofield, art as a specialized area of learning, require all attention from all concerned. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) summarize the importance of art as follows:

1. Art increases creativity. Art and creativity go hand in hand. The more one practices, the more he becomes perfect.
2. It is a natural human behaviour: It is important because it is not different from the reason why one needs food, shelter and clothing and comfort.
3. Art tells stories. Art can be a way of perpetuating historical facts through photography, videography, paintings, textiles, ceramics, sculpture and even music and dance.
4. It is a language. An adage says “a picture is more than a million words”, art verbalizes its own language that is audible to the deaf and visible to the blind. All items we use revolve around art, from the house we live in, the clothes we wear and our dressing accessories to the furniture we use at home and our home decorations.
5. Art evokes emotions: This is most noticeable in songs and other artistic areas. People respond to various art forms in different ways.
6. Art engenders happiness: The psychological positive effect of art is that children are happy when they see the good work they create.
7. Art is good for the economy: When artists make money from their works, it rubs off on the economy of the nation.
8. Art is therapeutic: It is a way of calming oneself and relieving stress. This is exemplified especially in the treatment and rehabilitation of mental patients.
9. Art is vital to human development: It increases the cognitive and psychomotor

domains of a child's development.

10. Art beautifies: whether it is the offices, theatres, streets or city centres, art acts as a catalyst for beautification.

4. Teaching of Visual Arts

Teaching the visual arts provides pupils with transferable skills that can boost overall academic achievement. This writer believe it is valuable to teach the visual arts as important subject on their own but linking it to many other curriculum areas can be made which helps to add interest and variety to topics.

In the words of Edward (1999), the visual arts is intended to equip children with a lot of skills such as critical thinking, respecting cultures other than theirs, learning from mistakes made in the course of art activities and emotional alertness. The visual arts curriculum is intended to equip children with an outlet to discover and communicate emotional state with their peers; it also helps inculcate strength and widen the scope of social skills.

Drawing, sculpting and creating can be a soothing activity which the children are in complete control of. Art exhibitions can be a boost for children's self-confidence and, boosting expectations in the school. Art exhibitions frequently boosts the activities of mental process, planning, exploring, experimenting and learning rather than always a final product which helps children realize the importance of resilience and process over product. Creative industries are at less risk of automation and employers often seek candidates who are resilient, enthusiastic and creative and so laying a solid foundation for children in this regards is a step in the right direction and an education that combines the arts with the sciences prepares young people for creative industries which require both artistic and scientific skills, so submits Gosh (1999).

This writer is of the view that teaching Art helps children learn to observe the world around them more closely and so Art teachers and professionals can help children balance activities of art in conjunction with other subject areas and concentrating in the areas of texture, form, shape and size; coiled pots or decorative tiles can be created to be used in the school garden. Brushes of different sizes and texture can be used as well as sponges, sticks and cardboard papers with serrated edges; colour mixing can be explored; perhaps children could create a piece using various shades of one colour such as blue.

Print making and printing techniques are a useful activity to execute in the open air art workshop ink can be rolled onto a plastic or glass surface and marks can be made with sticks, pencils or wood, in the same vein, vegetable printing is an effective way of exploring repeat patterns which can take place on large sheets of fabric in the outdoor environment. This writer is of the view that visual arts form an essential part of primary education; as educators we aim for our pupils to be able to imagine and to create new and unique solutions.

Whether our curriculum which places an emphasis on basic skills and standardized tests fully support creativity or not is for the formulators of education policies to explain. When children are introduced to interesting artworks and have opportunities to create by themselves, they soon discover that engaging in art activities is fundamental to their growth and development and likely to impact health

and happiness too. Purposeful learning often exists in children's interactions with others and their environment; a well-planned arts curriculum can develop a positive school culture where children develop a greater sense of well-being.

Yet, in our own cultural milieu, visual arts scholarship is often treated with disdain as compared to other subject areas, in spite of all the enumerated lofty ideals inherent in the visual arts and as such, there are major differences in access to visual art and science classes across the country. Across disciplines, there is room to re-imagine classes with a strong emphasis on the visual arts and other creative pursuits and encouraging children to unleash their imagination can help them actively engage with new concepts and realize the relationship between different areas and also as a boost for their social and emotional well-being.

Children use visual arts to make sense of the world, express themselves freely and understand each other and so visual arts education should be an integral part of basic school's curriculum. Children learn to understand their world through taste, touch, sound, sight and smell therefore, adding visual arts as a way to further their sensory awareness enhances a child's ability to process information, develop a sense of self, and understand things such as cultures and their own identity within themselves. But how can teachers make art education fashionable and meaningful in this modern day and age? In this essay, the writer delves into what the visual arts are, how to sharpen children's art skills, and how modern educational resources such as art materials can be used to the children's advantage.

Visual arts help children to use an array of media and tools such as painting, drawing, sculpting, architecture, film, photography, videography and printmaking to create things through visual experience. Within the framework of visual arts, there are certain categories and one of them is known as decorative arts, or otherwise known as crafts. This form of visual art involves the making of furniture or ceramics, interior decoration, jewellery making, metal crafting, woodworking and textiles.

5. Benefits of visual arts in Basic Education curriculum

Visual arts are meant to provoke a certain emotion, memory or thought, which is why it is an important subject in any school curriculum. The visual arts curriculum in schools should be woven around creating exploration and questioning certain concepts in other areas. These can be achieved through experimentation by either through writing or critique session or even through verbal response. Here are the main benefits and reasons why it is important to include visual arts skills in early basic education as advanced by Baldwin and Roberts (2006):

1. Visual arts helps develops excellent motor skills: Through exploration and creating their own art works, children learn to use and exercise their hands to create varieties of artwork using sundry materials and so engaging with these materials helps young students to further develop their excellent symmetrical motor skills through their artworks.
2. Improves critical thinking: By investigating their peers' artworks, exchanging ideas and critically reflecting on their art, children learn to study and understand other people and themselves, which ultimately enhances critical thinking.
3. Confidence in communication and of ideas: Engaging in visual arts enable children to communicate their feelings with their mates and teachers especially in

the area of achievements and failure, what materials to use and how to use them; and in so doing, their communication skills and confidence gains a boost and by explaining to their teachers and entire class why their artwork is the way they are, children learn how to express their feelings not only through art but also by verbal explanation.

4. Art improves academic performance. Art is an encapsulation of art and other subject areas and so there is likely to be transfer of knowledge from art to other study areas.

5. Art enhances and encourages self-reliance. Most students and graduates of art do not depend on white-collar jobs as they are already equipped with the necessary skills to make money for themselves and family after school.

6. Art inculcates leadership skills in children. When children are encouraged to make their own decisions, they begin to understand that they can update and interpret the world around them. These skills will make the child a leader rather than a follower. Therefore, irrespective of what profession or career the child chooses when they grow up, leadership qualities will ensure that they succeed in their chosen field. Art encourages problem-solving and analytical thinking skills in children; as a result, they learn to make decisions, which they will undoubtedly transfer to education and other aspects of life. Arts education encourages higher-level thinking to explore academic subjects and life outside of school.

As far as understanding the importance of art in education is concerned, the focus on creativity becomes vital to a comprehensive learning experience. Art offers students a distinct way to communicate, promoting problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Beyond its visual appeal, including art into education curriculum enhances students' communication abilities, stimulates innovation, and fosters a greater appreciation for different viewpoints. The inclusion of art not only adds depth to the academic journey but also nurtures skills necessary for navigating the complexities of the modern world, making education a dynamic and well-rounded pursuit.

Developing Critical Thinkers is the main objective of Art Education and in the realm of education, the primary goal of art education focuses on nurturing critical thinkers. By involving students in diverse art forms, this approach aims to enhance analytical skills, problem-solving abilities, and a profound comprehension of the world. Art education goes beyond fostering creativity; it acts as a driving force for refining observation, interpretation, and evaluation skills, empowering students to approach challenges with a thoughtful and discerning mindset. Through these objectives, art education is intended to produce persons that are capable of solving problems, thinking critically, and contributing maximally to their families and society.

6. Techniques for teaching visual arts in basic education schools

Subject handlers should show how relevant art is across all subjects. Art should be introduced into the other core areas such as the sciences and social sciences. This is a helpful way in promoting students' creative skills and encouraging learning and knowledge retention more effectively. Visual Art handlers should endeavour to include drawing and other forms of art activities in order to

widen understanding of the subject, incorporating art activities such as drawing, sculpting, photography or woodwork into other subjects can be helpful and not just for illustrative purpose.

Since art is a practical-oriented subject, art studios should be well equipped with suitable furniture and art materials. One-on-one teaching is the best method to be adopted since children are happier when directed on what to do. Group project is a suitable way of ensuring co-operation amongst children and sharing of art materials and inputs will further solidify friendship amongst them. An interesting session of art activities is the critique class; this has to do with the display of art works executed by each child with a view of talking on each of them by way of observation; this will ensure corrections are done by all concerned.

Teachers of visual Arts can advance some sample art activities for basic schools and below are examples of various art activities for teachers who are looking to teach art in primary schools from year one to year six. It is important to note that each year should explore various focus areas, such as drawing, 3D modeling, printing, group projects, textiles and so on. Year 1 to year 6 should include drawing; teachers should start by introducing sketchpads to pupils and let them start drawing simple shapes such as spirals and circles. Printmaking is a fun way to explore symmetry, textures, colours and shapes; using different materials to make prints; teachers should encourage children to use vegetable printing with potatoes or yam.

Playful exercise gives children free rein over the materials they use; teachers can help by providing papers and all other materials to create and beautify their works. Having expatiated on the above, the following are tips and snippets for teaching basic school art to provide art lessons and engage children in art-making in basic schools:

(a) Teachers should pick a focus. They should decide what they would like their pupils to focus on. This can be printing, painting, sculpting and others.

(b) Teachers should include contrast. Whether it means including contrasting colours and materials or introducing children to contrasting artists, it is important to show them different media and approaches to develop their understanding and appreciation for different art forms and their interpretation of these.

(c) Teachers should vary and use different media, whether it be sketchpads, television screen or another form of interactive display, children need to engage with different forms of visual art displayed on various forms of media to keep it modern as well as traditional. Teachers should be flexible with their response to how their pupils will interact and learn each topic.

7. Conclusions

The importance of teaching visual arts in basic schools cannot be overstressed. This topic has so far been engaging; basic education is the formative years in children's academic pursuit and so success are nurtured from this stage therefore must be taken very seriously. It is already a fact that there are problems inherent in the teaching and learning of art in basic schools in Nigeria. These problems are not insurmountable; problems like inadequate manpower, lack of studios and materials, dwindling economy, sub-standard funding by government and low morale on the part of the teachers are all contributory factors and have been recognized.

Government should do the needful by providing enabling environment in terms of financial and material resources so that the teaching of visual art can be both enjoyable and rewarding.

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