Philosophical Inquiry in Education, **Volume 31 (2024), No. 3, pp. 264-266**

Review of

The Necessity of Aesthetic Education: The Place of the Arts on the Curriculum

by Laura D'Olimpio, London: Bloomsbury, 2024

ELIZABETH O'BRIEN
Maynooth University

Education in the arts is uniquely positioned to prepare for a flourishing life, and as such should be a core element of compulsory schooling. So argues Laura D'Olimpio in her 2024 monograph *The Necessity of Aesthetic Education: The Place of the Arts on the Curriculum* (Bloomsbury). Part of the publisher's Philosophy of Education series, the text is both a philosophical contribution to the consideration of arts education and a contribution to the methods of philosophy and philosophical approaches to curricular reform. This slim book does considerable work and D'Olimpio's claim to a manifesto is reinforced by her writing style. Open and clear, the reader is prioritised. *The Necessity of Aesthetic Education* takes seriously education and educators, the arts and arts education, and most of all the student as worthy of a good life now while preparing practically and imaginatively to flourish in the future as well. As such, it is an important read for all who claim holistic education as a priority.

The Necessity of Aesthetic Education is also an important read for anyone interested or engaged in wrestling with models of education imposed upon by productivity, pressured to do everything-all-the-time with less, and suffocated by clinical approaches. By D'Olimpio's generous description, the flourishing lives we should develop our systems of education towards "will include having knowledge, being able to find meaningful work and earn a living, while also being able to engage critically and creatively in the political, social and cultural community of which they are a part" (p 32), which is a fairly inarguable basis for developing educational policy. In how this is achieved, however, she takes her stance.

D'Olimpio's case is that there are certain aesthetic experiences central to a flourishing life that the arts afford, thus aesthetic education should be mandatory across every level of compulsory schooling. This is not a case of forcing aesthetic experiences on students, if that were even possible, but rather showing them that such experiences are an option, that among the reactions one might have to a pink-skyed sunset or the finale of a musical performance are wonder and awe, and that these experiences can be deepened and expanded through education. Finding these experiences in varied artistic phenomena might mean a young person having, and recognising, aesthetic experiences more often outside of formal education and contribute to their living a flourishing life. D'Olimpio's central points are that aesthetic experience is necessary for a flourishing life and young people should be inducted into it.

Why the arts? Why in education? There are multiple ways that the arts can contribute to education towards a flourishing life, but what can only the arts do? What is their unique contribution? Why explicitly include aesthetic education on the curriculum, and make it compulsory? Across the world, curricula are crowded, teachers are in short supply and education is rarely a top site of fiscal investment. It can be and regularly is argued that other experiences achieve the same outcomes that aesthetic education is typically valued for. Students can be exposed to beauty in a literature class, work cooperatively in mathematics,

and experience wonder in a laboratory. If these boxes can be ticked in pre-established curricular priorities then there is no need to source and fund arts departments. The counter-argument is already here. In these classes, appreciation, connectivity and wonder are great if they happen but are not the aim or the intention. As a mathematics teacher, I remember keenly the times a student has sat back in awe or appreciation of the elegance of a mathematical proof, but aesthetic experience is not the point of the exercise. School should be a place where sometimes aesthetic experience *is* the point, and the arts classrooms are this place and space.

Why now? The place of the arts on the curriculum is under direct attack, experiencing funding cuts over several levels, as well as indirect erosion. D'Olimpio draws upon examples from the U.S., U.K. and Australian contexts to show the narrowing forces at play restricting the access and experience of school students to even the option of education in arts subjects. These jurisdictions focus funding of teacher professional development on the subjects that count in school league tables and university applications, which creates a cascade effect where less training means fewer teachers, which means fewer students, and this leads to a downturn in the uptake of arts subjects and, subsequently, to a reduced presence on school curricula.

The situation is complicated further when the funding of practicing artists is made conditional on educational outreach while simultaneously arts funding for schools is reduced. That the presence and contribution of artists in schools is wonderful isn't in question. A system of arts-related funding where, in effect, there is only one pot of money which can either go to current artists or future ones is uniquely short-sighted, and an important point this book raises. It is also an important call to think and to pay attention, especially as when in the midst of the bustle of school it can be easier to bury uneasy feelings and settle.

Pause and reflection, advocacy and pushing back are hard work, and it can feel necessary to justify arts education in terms of its added value. It is tempting to advocate for arts education on the basis of the impact it can have beyond an education in the arts and there are well-founded reasons to do so. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth and generous consideration of self-expression and moral improvement as two prominent reasons to include aesthetic education, or elements thereof, on the curriculum. Elliot Eisner and Maxine Greene are the central theorists drawn upon in this connection. Students should have the opportunity to express themselves through words, paint, clay and dance, and encountering songs, poetry, film, and textile creations can contribute to their education in multiple valuable ways.

These are not D'Olimpio's points and her refutation of such secondary benefits as creative self-expression or the development of virtuous habits as grounds for the inclusion of arts education is powerful because of its appreciative approach. Aesthetic education is good for self-expression in school, and exposure to visual, literary and auditory art can introduce the rich inner lives of others which is an essential first step towards living well in the world together, but here the focus is on something else, something more, rather than the inherent value of arts on the curriculum. This disconnected defence undermines aesthetic education, leaving it exposed to being replaced by other disciplines or reverse-engineered into them. Can't students learn to live well together through teamwork, and creatively express themselves by visualising their work? Then these can be integrated into the core curriculum and the art or music teacher's services are no longer required. The issue is not that highlighting the potential for self-expression or moral development through aesthetic education is unhelpful in itself, rather it is unhelpful because it is a reason for aesthetic education that ignores aesthetic education itself. In short, D'Olimpio argues for beginning with the *particular* benefits of aesthetic education and only then considering its transferrable benefits.

Supporting aesthetic education to stand on its own and resist the added-value defence is the challenge D'Olimpio rises to from Chapter 4 onwards, asking what the aesthetic is, so as to see what is unique about it, and to make the case that it is necessary on the curriculum in its own right. In D'Olimpio's words,

> I claim aesthetic education is necessary due to its distinctive ability to offer, invite and invoke aesthetic experience. Such meaningful experiences, of flow, harmony, beauty, the sublime, shock, awe, wonder, etcetera are integral to a flourishing life and, therefore, educators have a responsibility to teach students that they may participate in such experiences. It is upon this defence, of the role for aesthetic education in supporting aesthetic experiences and the vital role of such experiences in the flourishing life, that I rest my argument for compulsory school-based aesthetic education. (p. 76)

Emphasis is placed on supporting students to develop an open and receptive manner for educational engagement. To draw on that earlier example from my own practice, I might hope that my students appreciate the elegance of a mathematical proof, to experience awe and wonder when engaging with it, but that wasn't why the proof was created and it isn't why I teach it. Art, on the other hand, "is intentionally and purposively created to offer its receiver an aesthetic experience" (p. 78) and as such art is the optimal context in which to educate students in the possibilities of the aesthetic. Furthermore, the arts are inherently diverse and widely available. As D'Olimpio points out, not all schools can offer their students immersive experiences in nature, for example, but the beauty of images, poetry and song which draw on the natural world are not a poor substitute but an initiative experience so that the open and receptive manner persists when one day they encounter a real beach sunset or mountain sunrise. This education potentially helps to get more from life outside school.

To think about how this might be framed, D'Olimpio turns to Martha Nussbaum's conceptualisation of capabilities. If "the point of education is to support students to be in the best possible position to be able to live meaningful, autonomous lives, filled with rich experiences" (p. 76), then education should focus both on what they can do and on who they are. Drawing on Nussbaum's work brings the aesthetic experience, the good, flourishing life and the relational into focus. D'Olimpio, with Nussbaum, makes the point that to sense well and to "interpret, appreciate and express ourselves" well (p. 88) improves our lives in the world, and calls for information and cultivation through education.

Art, D'Olimpio writes, may do many things but it is distinctively valuable in its ability to generate aesthetic experiences. Educationally managed aesthetic experiences support young people in becoming capable of a flourishing life, and should be available consistently, to a high standard, for all students. Throughout the book, D'Olimpio raises access to the arts as a question of justice, and the arts themselves as uniquely inclusive and available in their myriad variety. A school may not have natural beauty on its doorstep, but all schools have access to visual, film and musical representation. To tap into them, well-educated, well-resourced and well-supported teachers are vital. This concern for investment in teachers is central to all D'Olimpio's argument and underpins the claim which might easily be sidelined: that aesthetic education should be compulsory. *The Necessity of Aesthetic Education* is a prime example of how philosophical approaches to educational research can work through complexity to improve both the theoretical foundations and practice of education, here making a strong, clear case for the place of the arts at the core of the curriculum as educational imperative and commitment to social justice.