

## Arts education transfer – thirty years’ debate for justifying arts

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### Abstract

The last thirty years, widespread concern about the role of arts in education has created demand for transfer research. The question has mainly been, how beneficial the arts are for students. Quite recently, in the field of music education, the first meta-analyses of the issue have been released (Sala & Gobet 2020; Cooper 2020). The outcome of the research has been proved also in earlier papers concerning other art forms (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles 2000), and hence meets the expectations of the average critical researcher. Direct transfer is a myth busted, which ought to have a significant influence on how these issues are discussed in the field of arts education from now on. In this paper, transfer research phenomenon is discussed and put in its historical context, as well as, some recommendations for another justification of arts in education is suggested.

*Keywords:* music, arts education, transfer.

### Transferencia de la educación artística: treinta años de debate para justificar las artes

#### Resumen

En los últimos treinta años, la preocupación generalizada por el papel de las artes en la educación ha creado una demanda de investigación de transferencia. La pregunta ha sido principalmente, qué tan beneficiosas son las artes para los estudiantes. Recientemente, en el campo de la educación musical, se han publicado los primeros meta-análisis del tema (Sala & Gobet 2020; Cooper 2020). El resultado de la investigación se ha probado también en artículos anteriores sobre otras formas de arte (Burton, Horowitz y Abeles 2000) y, por lo tanto, cumple con las expectativas del investigador crítico promedio. La transferencia directa es un mito derrotado, que debería tener una influencia significativa en cómo se discuten estos temas en el campo de la educación artística a partir de ahora. En este trabajo se discute el fenómeno de la investigación de transferencia dentro de su contexto histórico, así como se sugieren algunas recomendaciones para otra justificación de las artes en la educación.

*Palabras clave:* música, educación artística, transferencia.

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## Introduction

In education the term transfer refers to learning in one context and being able to apply it to another settings. It is a capacity to apply acquired knowledge and skills to a new situation. In 1993, in prestigious journal called *Nature*, a study was released that claimed that listening of Mozart's music had an impact on to the subjects' spatial perception abilities. So-called "Mozart effect" was born while the claims of the research were eagerly received, and at the same time, its results were overinterpreted. It was imagined that Mozart's music would have a broader impact on human cognitive abilities. Inspired by the idea, the governor of the state of Georgia donated CDs to the hospitals' maternity ward with the aim of raising the intelligence of babies. Since then, similar discs have been sold under a title "Mozart's music makes your kids smarter". However, when repeated later, the results of the original study (McCutcheon 2000) proved to be premature and the Mozart effect almost non-existent.

## Advocacy research

Although the first attempts of arts transfer research might sound unconvincing, the passion for researching and implementing interventions through arts was just started and since, has been increasing year by year. The arts education advocacy study sought to join forces and became particularly active around the 21st century with the aim of influencing policy makers and the general public (Brewer, 1998). From time to time, some critical views on this development have been, of course, presented. One of them coming from Harvard University Zero project (Hetland & Winner, 2001), which has studied these issues now for 50 years. However, these views are largely bypassed by arts education advocates.

The main reason for the development has been politics – especially Washington based agencies have lobbied the idea of the arts' usefulness for other learning extensively. In the United States, the role of arts had to be linked to the question of transfer, mainly due to president George W. Bush's educational reform plan called No Child Left Behind NCLB (signed into law in 2002). In the law, the arts were included to the curriculum as "core academic subjects". Due to this reason, they had to be measured, and teachers held accountable for the learning results in these subjects. Research work to enhance arts education was also incorporated in this agenda (Purnell 2004, 155).

Following the principles of NCLB, in 2002 the Arts Education Partnership (AEP) gathered evidence of the correlation between arts learning and cognitive capacities, social behavior, and academic achievements in *Critical Links*, a compendium including reviews of 62 art education studies. According to this inventory, evidence of transfer existed in variety of areas: Visual arts promote sophisticated reading skills/interpretation of text; Music, proficiency in mathematics, spatial temporal reasoning; Classroom drama, ability to understand complex issues and emotions and engagement; Dance, non-verbal reasoning, social tolerance; and multi-arts programs, just for example higher order thinking skills, ownership of learning, creativity and reading, verbal and mathematical skills (Catterall 2002, 152–153).

At the same time in Canada, one of the biggest arts education initiatives LTTA "Learning Through The Arts" -trademark by Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, claimed to take responsibility of the arts based education, as LTTA itself announced "*to transform the goals, culture and methodologies of public education*" (Wyman 2004, 56). The core idea of LTTA was that artists and teachers collaboratively planned and carried out integrative curriculum by using wide variety of methods and the means of arts e.g. in LTTA children learn math, science, language, history, or social studies by making images, creating dances, telling stories, and singing songs. To prove the benefits of the program research on impacts of the program was ordered (Upitis & Smithrim, 2005) that was based on sample including over 6000 students and their parents, teachers, and principals. In these both cases (AEP and LTTA), the aim of the research was to testify, how wonderful and beneficial different arts in education are.

However, correlation does not imply causality. Following the spirit of the times, no-one really cared to criticize the methodology or the findings, which suited well for their purpose – to advocate arts in education. The era of “arts for art’s sake” was seen to be over. However, transfer argumentation did not convince the decision makers in the field of education. Despite of all the efforts, hours dedicated to arts in OECD countries have been steadily decreasing year after year (Winner et al. 2013, 15). It is worthwhile to think, how plausible transfer argumentation really is.

### Recent meta-analysis

Since correlative studies does not prove causality, and in social science to prove any effects of an intervention is always a matter of interpretation, to prove something needs more than one or just few studies on the same subject in order to be convincing and statistically significant. The meta-analysis brings together as many scientific studies on the same subject as possible, after which they are examined statistically.

Recent meta-analyses on music education meet abovementioned criterion well (Sala & Gobet 2020; Cooper 2020) and address the presumed effects of music to reading and learning math. The data from the previous study include 54 studies with a total of 6984 subjects; the latter consists of 100 studies with a number of subjects of 5612. What do these studies tell us? In short: although music practice is generally believed to have a positive effect on children’s cognitive abilities and learning outcomes (literacy and numeracy), these arguments are unequivocally untrue. In a same way, the wider assumption that arts would influence learning and students’ character directly, like penicillin influences on inflammation, is not merely oversimplification but, in essence, superstition.

The power of the arts needs to be observed as it is, a complex phenomenon with holistic effects, and comprehended from “silent-powerful” signals as individual or communal expressions and implications or the arts in the origins of a man. It is more complicated than some evidence of measured results or direct measurable proof, and as such, leads to the tracks of arts in evolutionary musicology (Wallin et al. 2000), musical imagination, creativity and perception (Hargreaves et al. 2012), or music as language and communication (Malloch & Trevarthen 2009) or other holistic comprehensions. This will consequence as a rich pool to observe, with multiple sets of triangulation data to explain arts-connected processes with the significance of detailed, accurate information.

The possible impact of arts learning may be found from the explanation that perceptions of transfer are partially a function of the degrees to which different disciplines share certain cognitive elements, dispositions, or ways of thinking. These capacities or ways of thinking do not, however, translate to other domains unless they are practiced in that way purposely. The various skills, attitudes, and ways of doing do not usually generalize as a matter of course; they are dependent upon **instruction** (Burton, Horowitz and Abeles 2000, 228–230).

In other words, to enhance learning by using art, we have to do so deliberately, relying on both the distinctive character of different art forms and the characters of other domains. This requires, for example, co-operation between educators from different fields. Constructivist approach, awareness of learning dialogues with the understanding of music or arts as a phenomenon, and the role of emotions in wellbeing support us to explore and construct the framework for these kinds of purposes.

### Conclusions

Knowing well that being “MythBusters” may raise objections within arts education field, it is fair to sum up claims on transfer, which might help to understand the views presented in this paper:

1. The arts do not increase a learner's cognitive abilities. Instead, the arts are their own form of knowing and understanding.
2. Short-distance transfer is possible, but its scope is pedagogically very limited, especially, if not knowing the origins and theoretical grounds for the pedagogues chosen.
3. The arts can correlate with positive social experiences. However, this same phenomenon can also materialize in many other intentional activities (exercise, science, etc.) when the learner's own interests and content area meet in a fruitful way.
4. The basis of art education can be found in the arts and their associated meanings. The arts tell the story of the world and people's relationship to life. This is a sufficient reason to study them and also fundamental for defining and defending the position of arts in global cultures, especially at the Western societies.
5. If these hypotheses are true, the art educators have to abandon the transfer discourse and focus on what they believe is true and matters most – the arts.

In addition: By focusing on the individual experiences, modern educational system often rejects and neglects the intergenerational experience, which is also called culture. By relying on the experience of past generations (which means also learning from their mistakes), it is also possible for us to develop a new and living culture - a good life whose ingredients are truth, beauty and goodness.

Those who do not believe this will, of course, come up with their own ideas for promoting arts in education.

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