SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN ARTS EDUCATION

Wenjun Wu

Abstract

The importance of arts education cannot be overstated, as it allows students to express themselves creatively and develop essential skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving. However, there is a growing concern that current arts education primarily focuses on knowledge acquisition and skill development while neglecting the emotional needs of students. In this paper, we explore the issue of utilitarianism in current art education and how current arts education neglects the emotional needs of students. Utilitarianism, which prioritizes the usefulness of education over its intrinsic value, often leads to a narrow focus on developing technical skills and knowledge at the expense of students' emotional needs. We introduce the concept of socio-emotional learning and its impact on arts education. Socio-emotional learning is an educational method that promotes emotional growth, cooperative learning opportunities, and intuitive insights through arts integration. We argue that socio-emotional learning can help students better understand themselves and others and lead to more meaningful and fulfilling artistic experiences.

Keywords: socio-emotional learning; arts education; utilitarianism

1. Introduction

Arts education has long been recognized as a valuable tool for fostering students' creativity, imagination, and critical thinking skills. However, traditional arts education models have been criticized for prioritizing knowledge acquisition and skills development over socio-emotional learning. This approach often relies on test-oriented teaching methods and mechanical repetition training, which overlooks students' emotional needs and can harm their mental health. This shift can be attributed to several factors, including the utilitarian tendency of education and the need for controllability and measurability in educational measurement.

First, the utilitarian tendency of education negatively affects arts education. In her Not for Profit, the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes the trend towards utilitarian education that has spread worldwide: education is oriented towards economic efficiency, technology is promoted, humanities and arts education projects are cut, and so on. This tendency assumes education should be oriented towards economic efficiency and promote technology's importance. The trend manifests itself in the practice of arts education in terms of its quantification, emphasis on standards, knowledge acquisition, and skills training at the expense of its humanistic attributes and the complex diversity of the human mind. As a result, arts education is often evaluated based on its ability to produce measurable outcomes, such as test scores or job readiness, rather than its ability to promote emotional growth and well-being. As Nussbaum (2010) puts it: "We seem to have forgotten that he should be seen as a human being with a soul and not merely as a useful tool."

Second, the need for controllability and measurability in educational measurement requires arts education to focus on knowledge acquisition and skills training. To measure progress, teachers must be able to quantify students' learning in a way that is consistent and objective. This requirement often leads to focusing on technical skills and memorization of theory rather than exploring emotions and personal expression. For example, under the current standards, a music teacher often starts with the piece's rhythm, beat, and meter. In contrast, a language arts teacher often just asks about the meanings of words, phrases, or paragraphs with little space for imagination or in-depth discussions. Such pedagogy and curricula have art more as an intellectual product rather than something inclusive of human emotions. Even though some teachers are aware of the limitations of this teaching style, they can get stuck in a rut. As Eisner (2001) writes: "For example, what feedback could be more educational than 'Good job!' or 'Beautiful!'?" Teachers can't find a better evaluation system, so they must use the original standard.

While this approach may result in students acquiring certain skills and knowledge, it often neglects art's emotional and affective aspects. As a result, students may become detached from the artistic experience, and their creativity may suffer.

In this kind of arts education, students are taught to focus solely on technical aspects such as rhythm, beat, and meter or the meanings of words, phrases, or paragraphs, with little room for imagination or in-depth discussion. This approach reduces art to an intellectual product, devoid of the emotional and experiential components that make art a powerful expression. This lack of emotional engagement with art can harm students' mental health.

In contrast, arts education emphasizing socio-emotional learning can positively impact students' mental health. Students are encouraged to explore their inner world and develop empathy toward others by focusing on emotional awareness, self-expression, and social connection. This approach prioritizes the emotional components of art, such as the emotions and experiences that art can evoke, rather than just the technical aspects of creating art.

2. Socio-emotional learning in arts education

Utilitarianism and technology-oriented arts education often bring staleness, repetition, and the accompanying senselessness, mediocrity, and numbness. How to awaken students from the state of innocence or numbness in their minds? How to connect art with a student's life experience? To solve the problems arts education is now facing, combining socio-emotional learning with arts education is a good method.

As Elias, Maurice J. (2003) said in *Academic and social-emotional learning*, social-emotional learning (SEL) is developing essential social and emotional skills, knowledge, and attitudes to effectively manage emotions, set and achieve goals, maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. SEL is important for individuals of all ages, as it can improve mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. Through SEL, individuals can learn skills such as empathy, self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, and relationship-building, which can be applied in various personal and professional contexts. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of socio-emotional learning in arts education, particularly in light of the mental health challenges many young people face today. To address this, arts education should focus more on providing opportunities for socio-emotional learning, which means creating a learning environment that prioritizes emotional awareness, self-expression, and social connection. It also means developing teaching strategies that enable students to explore their emotions and experiences through artistic expression.

By prioritizing socio-emotional learning, arts education can enable students to explore their inner world, develop empathy towards others, and establish connections with others and the world. Aristotle says, "Man is a more social animal than the bees or herding cattle" (Aristotle, *Politics*). Arts education thus satisfies students' need to connect with others, promoting the development of students' mental health.

In China, there is a phenomenon that can prove the harm of lacking emotional engagement. Zhou (2012), former Vice President of the Central Conservatory of Music, describes it as "learning a technique and hating an art." He said: "Actually, 98% of parents do not want their children to become professional musicians, but we have conducted rigorous professional training for 100% of the children." In other words, a lot of amateur education is too specialized. In this specialized education, teachers' emphasis on skills training has led to the perfect imitation of a certain skill, which has become one of the excellent standards.

In addition, some parents' lack of understanding of arts education and their pursuit of awards and other honors have increased the burden on students. A child may be admired for being able to play a famous piano piece at an early age, but little attention is paid to whether he or she knows the meaning behind the piece. As a result, students are forced to receive a lot of skills training in arts education. In this high-intensity training, students gradually lose their enthusiasm for art; some even develop an aversion to art. In this kind of arts education, the hard work of technical training, the disgust after being forced, the frustration caused by the pursuit of perfection, and all kinds of negative emotions harm students' mental health. Focusing on technical skills and knowledge can also lead to numbness, in which students produce standard or even substandard artwork that lacks the creativity and originality that should be at the heart of artistic expression. In addition, students may feel disconnected from their own emotions and those of others, leading to a sense of isolation and detachment.

This is a typical art education that lacks emotional connection. In the above example, if socio-emotional learning is added, students will be guided to feel the art to discover their interest in art. This helps motivate them to learn music independently, helping them along the learning path. Socio-emotional learning is a process that helps individuals develop and apply social and emotional skills, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to effectively navigate their personal and social lives. It involves acquiring and using knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. Socio-emotional learning is often integrated into school curriculums and is designed to support student's academic and personal growth. The skills developed through socio-emotional learning can help individuals in various aspects of their lives, including relationships, work, and overall well-being. Combining arts education with socio-emotional learning can focus on individual life and infiltrate humanistic care.

3. Art is inherently evocative: defamiliarization theory.

Defamiliarization, or estrangement, is a literary technique in which a familiar object or concept is presented in an unfamiliar or strange way to challenge the reader's perception and understanding. (Crawford, Lawrence, 1984) Through defamiliarization, the author aims to disrupt the reader's automatic perception and

interpretation of the world and to encourage them to look at familiar things in a new and different light. This can involve using unusual metaphors or similes, breaking grammar or syntax rules, or unexpectedly presenting everyday objects. Literature often uses defamiliarization to create a sense of estrangement or alienation and encourage critical thinking and reflection on the reader's part. It is also used in other art forms, such as painting and film, to challenge the viewer's perceptions and assumptions.

According to the defamiliarization theory, art education with socio-emotional learning allows students to move away from the conventional world and discover the diversity and uniqueness of the world. Instead of being taught how to draw or paint, students should be encouraged to explore and express their emotions through art. This approach would help students to develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy toward others. At the same time, arts education should guide students to understand art and understand the emotions conveyed by the artists. Anyone without any arts education can recognize that it is a sunflower when he or she sees Van Gogh's painting of sunflowers. Students should be guided to feel the emotions conveyed by the painter through this painting, the fanatical passion of the painter himself, and even resonate with this passion for life, thus affecting the students themselves. Moreover, art can be used as a tool for students to explore and express their cultural identity, enhancing their sense of belonging and cultural awareness.

As noted by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky (1925), the first one coining the Defamiliarization theory in the early 20th century, "To return sensation to our limbs, to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By 'estranging' objects and complicating forms, the art device makes perception long and 'laborious.' The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant." Art is about acquiring knowledge and technical skills and experiencing and feeling the world around us. By discovering the world's diversity, students gain a keen sense of perception, which allows them to discover the artist's emotions in artworks and thus connect with their own life experiences. For example, students can be encouraged to analyze a painting or a sculpture and identify the emotions the artist conveys. By doing so, art education can be a valuable tool for fostering artistic skills, emotional intelligence, and mental well-being.

4. Emotional Resonance in arts education

Students can better understand themselves and the world by studying and practicing various art forms. One important aspect is emotional resonance, or the ability to connect with and understand the emotions expressed in art. Art can unite people across cultures and periods, creating a sense of shared humanity. When students engage with art, they learn about a particular form or technique and encounter the common human spirit expressed through it. Encountering the common spirit can be a transformative experience, allowing students to see themselves as part of something larger than themselves.

Students can develop emotional resonance through this encounter with the common human spirit. They learn to recognize and connect with the emotions expressed in art and find parallels in their experiences. This can help students dissipate negative emotions and feel more positive ones, such as empathy and joy. By promoting emotional resonance, arts education can benefit students' mental health in various ways. It can help alleviate stress and anxiety, promote well-being, and improve emotional regulation. Additionally, it can help students develop important social and emotional skills, such as empathy and perspective-taking, that are essential for success in various contexts.

Art, especially classic art, embodies the aesthetic psychology of groups and ethnic groups. Therefore, Du (2004) said: "The process of art appreciation and creation also means a certain blend of personality, society, culture, and history. It is the penetration of historical and cultural elements into the individual's heart". This process is also the process of education in a broad sense. Herbert Reed used the concept of "integration" to describe in Education Through Art (1954): "Education is not only a process of completing individualization, but also a process of integration. Integration is the coordination of individual uniqueness and social unity." Confucius said that "poetry can form a group," which is the summary of the cohesion and connection functions of art. The reason why art can realize the function of this "group" art expresses a kind of "subtle but incomparable firm belief that weaves together countless lonely hearts" (Greene & Ayers, 2018). Arts education with this rich humanistic quality allows people to find resonance in the common emotional forms of human beings.

5. Conclusion

Today's emphasis on knowledge acquisition and skill development has become a worldwide dominant focus of education systems. The rationale behind this approach is that it enables students to acquire the technical skills they need to excel in their chosen fields. However, this approach has often led to a lack of attention to the emotional needs of students. Arts education is a field that has the potential to address this issue. It allows students to express themselves creatively, engage with others, and develop important socio-emotional skills.

However, this is only possible if schools integrate socio-emotional learning into their arts education programs. Socio-emotional learning promotes emotional growth, cooperative learning opportunities, and intuitive insights through arts integration. It aims to develop student's social skills, emotional intelligence, and overall well-being. By integrating this approach into arts education, schools can create a more holistic learning environment that caters to the emotional needs of students.

Overall, while the emphasis on knowledge acquisition and skills training is understandable, it should not come at the expense of socio-emotional learning. Including socio-emotional learning in arts education can enrich students' personal growth and improve their academic success. By emphasizing this approach, schools can help to foster a generation of emotionally resilient and socially aware individuals who are better equipped to face the challenges of today's world. Such individuals are more likely to thrive in their careers, engage in meaningful relationships, and lead fulfilling lives.

References

[1] Aristotle. (2004). Politics: A treatise on government. [eBook #6762]. Project Gutenberg. https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/6762.epub.noimages

[2] Crawford, L. (1984). Viktor Shklovskij: Différance in Defamiliarization. Comparative Literature, 36(3), 209–219. https://doi.org/10.2307/1770260

[3] Du, W. (2004) On Contemporary Issues of Chinese Beauty and Research. Literature and Art Research, 2004 (6): 5-7. (in Chinese)

[4] Eisner, E. W. (2001). Should we create new aims for Art Education? Art Education, 54(5), 6. https://doi.org/10.2307/3193929

[5] Elias, M. J. (2003). Academic and social-emotional learning (Vol. 11). Brussels, Belgium: International Academy of Education.

[6] Greene, M., & Ayers, W. (2018). Variations on a blue guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on aesthetic education. Teachers College Press.

[7] Guo, Y. (2022). The Dislocation and Construction of Chinese Contemporary Children's art education from the Perspective of Aesthetic Education. In E. E. Editor & F. F. Editor (Eds.), Proceedings of the 2021 Conference on Art and Design: Inheritance and Innovation (ADII 2021). https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/adii-21/125970451

[8] Nussbaum, M. C. (2016). Not for profit: With a new preface by the author: Why democracy needs the humanities. Princeton University Press.

[9] Read, H. (2016). Education through art. Facsimile Publishers.

[10] Zhou, H. (2012). Learning Piano Cannot Be to "Learn a Technique and Hate an Art." Xinhua Daily Telecom Cultural Observation, 2012. 07. 06, ver.015. (in Chinese)