Policy overview and best practice report on arts-based education across Europe

Summary

A comparison of policy documents by UNESCO, the EU and the OECD shows that these institutions share a common understanding of arts-based education, recognising the significant role of arts and cultural literacy in fostering creativity, critical thinking, cultural awareness and social inclusion in order to overcome educational poverty and to further sustainable development. These public organisations were chosen because they are the key players in addressing policy recommendations and guidelines in the field of arts-based education relevant for adoption by the EU member states.

The policy documents released by UNESCO remain mostly high-level, with limited suggestion of specific actions, focusing on general principles such as collaboration and training. They contain recommendations functioning as guidelines or frameworks that member states should adopt at a more practical level. The role of culture in education and sustainable development is stressed throughout these policy documents and is followed by a direct reference to arts-based education and cultural literacy. The inclusion of arts-based education is also highlighted within a broader framework of life-long learning, emphasising both formal and informal education, but without reference to specific target groups or age groups.

In preparation of the international conference Education and Public Awareness for Sustainability held in Thessaloniki, 8-12 December 1997, UNESCO published the policy paper *Educating for a Sustainable Future: A Transdisciplinary Vision for Concerted Action* (Paris, November 1997), which for the first time emphasises the role of culture as a key element for a comprehensive approach to education for sustainable development. It contains no specific reference yet to arts-based education, which is mentioned in subsequent documents (e.g., *Road Map for Arts Education* (UNESCO, Paris 2006), based on deliberations at the World Conference on Arts Education, Lisbon, 6-9 March 2006).

In the evolution of UNESCO documents, additional and more practical elements are introduced, such as informal education, the involvement of various types of stakeholders, not only schools but also artists and cultural institutions, the integration of technologies and digital tools, the importance of creating learning environments providing opportunities to exercise cultural rights. The concept of "cultural rights" comes as a general umbrella in the UNESCO policy approach to arts education, as equal educational and cultural opportunities are the basis of cultural rights. In this framework the general objective of UNESCO in promoting arts education is meant to foster cultural rights and to promote inclusive policies and equal access to and participation in culture.

Unlike UNESCO, the European Union takes a more functional and concrete approach to culture, education and arts-based education. EU documents analysed include policy documents from the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

The EU primarily views arts-based education as an asset, serving as a tool to develop competencies such as cultural awareness that contribute to competitive economic goals in the need to make Europe a more competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy. This is the general and initial framework in which culture, education and arts education are embedded, with a focus on how arts education can be a strategic tool for economic competitiveness and, subsequently, for social cohesion, diversity and inclusion, which have become a more recent European strategic focus, stressing the need to foster culture, education and arts education as a means to develop a European cultural identity, as well as the need to adopt inclusive policies aimed at guaranteeing equal access to quality education, within the broader objective of creating a strategic vision of a European Education Area.

For its part, the OECD advocates and encourages policymakers to invest in and include arts education in school curricula. In its policy documents, the OECD's main objective and focus is to develop and improve educational systems and enhance skills, particularly those related to creative thinking, which can also be developed through arts-based education. The OECD views arts-based education as a tool for developing these skills and as a way to strengthen students' profiles, with broader system-wide effects.

Key Findings

UNESCO, EU and OECD share a common understanding of arts-based education and its significance in fostering creativity, critical thinking, cultural literacy and social inclusion, with a noticeable shift from mere intentions to more programmatic recommendations. However, only few policy documents address specific target groups.

UNESCO provides high-level recommendations focused on cultural rights, equal access and social inclusion aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting the inclusion of arts-based education within a broader framework of life-long learning.

The EU institutions consider arts-based education as a driver of cultural awareness, social inclusion and diversity, aimed at fostering a common and cohesive European identity and at developing skills that contribute to making Europe a more competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy.

OECD documents focus on improving educational systems and skills related to creative thinking, viewing arts-based education as a tool for developing these skills and investigating the impact of arts education on these objectives.

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The reports released by the OECD attempt to demonstrate the impact of arts education, noting the lack of data and research in this field. They investigate the role of arts education in the development of a broad range of skills, but also defend the intrinsic value of the arts and of arts education. OECD reports do not contain any specific references to the STEAM approach (i.e., the integration of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics teaching); the role of the arts in developing a broad range of skills is stressed, especially in more recent documents and in the new PISA approach (the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment), including the PISA Creative Thinking test.

Conclusion

Comparing the approaches, terms, definitions and key objectives utilised in policy documents by UNESCO, the EU and the OECD, several similarities but also differences can be identified, which, in some cases, reflect the general objectives of these organisations. UNESCO documents are characterised by a more general and high-level focus, developed through recommendations, on the role of culture and arts education as a means to promote cultural rights, equal access and participation in culture, also in connection to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The OECD, while it appears to be more closely aligned with the EU in stressing the need to develop creative thinking as a key skill, diverges from the UNESCO and the EU in its more analytical approach developed through research, stressing the need to study the impacts of arts education in fostering creative thinking, but also pointing out the intrinsic value of the arts and of arts education. The effects and impacts of arts education as a driver of social inclusion and as a means for the development of creativity, critical thinking and cultural awareness, are often taken for granted in these policy documents, while the OECD analyses the relations and impacts of arts education and the ways in which these skills are developed.

Overall, the analysis of these documents concludes a noticeable shift from mere intentions to more programmatic documents and concrete actions, which are more evident in the case of the EU with the creation of the European Education Area while they remain at a more general level of recommendations in the case of UNESCO. While there is a general trend towards more concrete actions, programmes, frameworks, agendas, funding programmes and working groups, the need for more specific policy implementations must be stressed even though they grant to member states the flexibility to adopt and implement these policy strategies considering the diverse traditions and approaches applied by each country in the field of culture and arts education.

Methodology

The researchers analysed documents from UNESCO, the EU and the OECD related to cultural literacy and arts-based education. Only major documents containing precise references to culture and arts-based education were taken into account. Policy documents published between 1997 and 2024 were selected, considering the first relevant document published by UNESCO in 1997 as a milestone in arts-based education policies. The selection criteria for policy documents were twofold: 1) policy relevance and impact with regard to cultural literacy and arts education; 2) public availability and online access. In order to understand similarities and differences in approach, the following issues have been examined: the evolution of arts-based education policies; methods and tools of intervention (working groups, research reports, declarations, manifestos, frameworks, agendas, funding, projects); stakeholders involved (schools, cultural institutions, artists, universities, civil society); targets addressed (teachers, artists, students); themes. The documents were analysed diachronically to study changes and developments in approaches and themes.

Reference

Ilenya Camozzi, Zenia Simonella and Silvia Tarassi, *D2.1 Policy overview and best practice report on arts-based education across Europe*. UNIMIB, Milan, 2024.

Policy Takeaways

According to the three organisations, educational policies require a better understanding and more specific consideration of the mutual relationship between culture and education. Distinct impacts of each cultural domain (visual arts, music, theatre, dance…) are to be taken into account as well.

In European educational policies, arts education, cultural literacy and cultural rights are often taken for granted and on the contrary need to be fully embedded in their objectives and actions.

The concept of "learning environments" still requires to be practically developed, as it is unclear whether dedicated spaces for arts education are foreseen in schools as well as for the STEAM approach.

Overall, the three organisations emphasise the lack of funding and the need for resources and specific funding programmes.

The Cultural Literacies' Value in Europe (CLiViE) project develops and applies a Theory of Change (ToC) methodology and Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework to increase our understanding of the value of cultural literacy through arts-based education on social cohesion.

CLiViE
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