



American Journal of Education and Technology (AJET)

ISSN: 2832-9481 (ONLINE)

Volume 3 Issue 2 (2024)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHER, DELAWARE, USA

Exploring Innovative Approaches and Interventions to Address Misconceptions and Promote Effective Visual Arts Education in Secondary Schools in Ghana

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Article Information

Received: February 07, 2024

Accepted: March 18, 2024

Published: March 22, 2024

Keywords

Visual Arts Education, Art Education, Secondary Education, Ghana, Innovative Practices, Creative Arts Integration

ABSTRACT

Visual arts education is important in developing students' creativity, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. However, in Ghana, visual arts subjects at the secondary school level often need help with challenges such as lack of resources, large class sizes, and misconceptions about the value of art education. This study aimed to explore innovative approaches and interventions that could address misconceptions and promote effective visual arts education in Ghana's secondary schools. A qualitative document analysis and thematic analysis were conducted. Relevant policy documents, national curriculum frameworks, and previous research studies related to visual arts education in Ghana were analyzed to identify existing challenges, opportunities, and recommendations. Key emerging themes included misconceptions about visual arts subjects, lack of resources, training for art teachers and large class sizes that do not augur well for hands-on learning. The analysis also identified recommendations such as integrating visual arts across the curriculum, promoting art exhibitions, and leveraging community resources and partnerships to support visual arts programmes. This study provides insights into existing challenges in visual arts education in Ghana's secondary schools and highlights innovative approaches that could help address misconceptions and strengthen visual arts programmes. Integrating visual arts across subject areas, promoting art exhibitions, improving teacher training, and leveraging community partnerships may help promote effective visual arts education.

INTRODUCTION

Visual arts education plays an important role in students' development and learning. Extensive research has shown that art education can boost cognitive abilities, enhance creative and critical thinking skills, and even improve academic performance in other subject areas (Rabkin & Redmond, 2006). Art provides opportunities for hands-on project-based learning that allow students to solve problems and develop perseverance (Burnaford *et al.*, 2007). This active, participatory learning approach has been linked to higher-order thinking skills and increased engagement in school (Deasy, 2002).

Furthermore, art education helps develop cultural awareness and expression. Learning about various artistic disciplines exposes students to different world cultures and perspectives (Bamford, 2006). The ability to appreciate artistic works and traditions is an important part of becoming a well-rounded, globally-minded citizen. Visual arts education in particular focuses on developing creative design skills through areas such as drawing, painting, sculpture and photography. This hands-on learning allows students to explore novel ideas and gain confidence in self-expression (Eisner, 2002).

While arts education provides valuable benefits, visual arts programmes in Ghana's secondary schools face several challenges that hinder their effectiveness (Nortey, Bodjawah & Poku, 2021). Large class sizes, sometimes exceeding 50 students, make it difficult for teachers to provide individualized feedback and attention to develop

students' creative skills (British Council, 2014). Resources such as art supplies, materials, and technology are also limited in most schools due to lack of funding (Nortey, Bodjawah & Poku, 2021).

Misconceptions about the value of visual arts subjects also exist among administrators, teachers, parents, and students (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2013). They are often seen as less important or rigorous than core academic subjects. This impacts motivation and voluntary enrolment in art courses. At the same time, visual arts teachers often do not receive adequate training nor support to develop pedagogical skills specific to art disciplines (British Council, 2014). The national curriculum also does not fully integrate visual arts across other subject areas.

These challenges have contributed to declining interest and participation in visual arts education within Ghana's secondary school system (Nortey, Bodjawah & Poku, 2021). If left unaddressed, students may lose opportunities to develop their creative capacities. This warrants further exploration of innovative solutions.

Given the challenges faced by visual arts programs in Ghanaian secondary schools, there is a need to explore innovative solutions that could strengthen arts education. Previous studies have documented issues such as lack of resources, large class sizes, and misperceptions about the value of arts subjects (Nortey, Bodjawah & Poku, 2021; British Council, 2014). However, more research is still needed to understand promising approaches and interventions.

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The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore innovative strategies that could address misconceptions and promote effective visual arts education in Ghana secondary schools. Through document analysis of existing policies, curricula and research relating to arts education in Ghana, the study seeks to identify recommendations for interventions aimed at enhancing teacher training, community partnerships, integration of arts across subjects and other areas (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2013). Developing a deeper understanding of challenges and opportunities could help inform policies and practices to support visual arts programs in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Value and Benefits of Art Education

Research has demonstrated numerous cognitive, social, and academic benefits of art education. Art learning facilitates creative and critical thinking skills that are transferable to other subject areas (Deasy, 2002). When integrated across disciplines, art can boost understanding and retention of non-art content like languages, mathematics, and science (Ruppert, 2006).

Studies have also linked art education to improved academic outcomes. Students who participate more extensively in art tend to have higher GPAs, standardized test scores, and rates of college enrollment (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). Art may help strengthen problem-solving, reasoning, and communication abilities which are essential for success in school and career (Burnaford *et al.*, 2007).

On a social and personal level, art education can develop cultural awareness, collaboration skills, confidence, and enthusiasm for learning. Through experiential learning in visual arts, students gain self-expression, perseverance and enhanced engagement in the learning process (Bamford, 2006; Eisner, 2002). Art education deals with both cognitive and non-cognitive benefits such as analysis, interpretation, critical thinking, creativity, intuition and emotional expression which are increasingly recognized as important for holistic human development and well-being.

Challenges Faced by Art Programmes in Developing Countries

Art education programmes in developing countries face challenges similar to those seen in Ghana. Several studies have identified common issues such as lack of funding, large class sizes, and shortage of qualified art teachers (UNESCO, 2006; Bloomfield & Childs, 2000).

Limited funding is a significant barrier, as it impacts the availability of basic resources like art supplies, equipment, technology and instructional materials (Bloomfield & Childs, 2000). Large class sizes over 50 students also make it difficult for teachers to provide individualized learning and feedback in hands-on art subjects (UNESCO, 2006). Retaining qualified art teachers also poses a challenge, as teaching may not be perceived as a prestigious or well-compensated career. Without adequate ongoing

professional development, teachers' capacity to implement innovative and student-centred art pedagogy can be hindered (British Council, 2014).

In many communities, there remains the misconception that art subjects are not financially nor academically worthwhile compared to other disciplines like maths and sciences. This affects participation rates and overall prioritization of visual arts within educational systems (British Council, 2014).

Existing Approaches to Strengthen Art Education

Several evidence-based strategies have been employed globally to address challenges in art education systems. Integrating visual arts across academic subjects can help improve understanding and make learning more engaging (Deasy, 2002). For example, using drama to illustrate a history lesson or singing to reinforce maths concepts.

Leveraging community resources through partnerships with local art organizations, museums and individual artists brings enriching art experiences into schools at a low cost (Manner, 2002). Such collaborations also help raise awareness of art programmes.

Promoting student art exhibitions and performances develops pride and motivation, while educating families and community members about the learning and skills developed (Burnaford *et al.*, 2007). Exposing the process builds appreciation for art disciplines.

Investing in teacher professional development, for instance through workshops, continuing education credits and best practice sharing, helps update pedagogy and renew enthusiasm (Bloomfield & Childs, 2000). Supportive policies and funding priorities also signal the value placed on visual arts learning.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study employs qualitative research methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues. Specifically, document analysis and thematic analysis were used to analyze existing secondary data sources related to visual arts education in Ghana.

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating printed and electronic material (Bowen, 2009). It was used to examine policy documents, curricula, programme evaluations and academic articles that could provide insights into the key themes within the data.

Thematic analysis allows for themes and patterns to emerge from the raw data through an inductive coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was applied to analyze the documents and identify common challenges, opportunities and recommendations discussed across sources.

Together, these qualitative approaches are appropriate for extracting relevant information from a wide range of materials and interpreting the data collected to address the study purpose (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The methods allow for rich description and understanding of the context surrounding visual arts education in Ghana.

Data Sources

The data sources analyzed in this study consisted of national education policy documents and frameworks, curriculum guidelines, as well as previous research studies related to visual arts education in Ghana.

Policy documents from the Ministry of Education in Ghana provided context on goals and priorities for visual arts learning at the secondary level (Ministry of Education, 2010). National curriculum frameworks outlined the pedagogical approach and learning outcomes for visual arts courses (Ghana Education Service, 2007). Previous evaluative studies and assessments of school programmes served as additional data sources. These included assessments by international organizations like UNESCO and the British Council (UNESCO, 2006; British Council, 2014). Academic research articles published in peer-reviewed journals also informed the study (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2013).

Analyzing these varied data sources allowed for triangulation to identify corroborated themes across different studies and contexts (Guion *et al.*, 2011). The documents collectively provided robust data to address the research questions.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analytic process involved several steps guided by approaches for qualitative document analysis and thematic analysis (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, all documents were compiled and carefully reviewed to gain familiarity. Initial impressions and potential themes were noted.

Next, an inductive coding process commenced where excerpts from the data relating to challenges, opportunities or recommendations in visual arts education were systematically labeled.

Codes were then analyzed to identify connections and patterns, which formed the basis of initial themes. Themes were reviewed about the coded extracts and entire data set to validate accurate representation.

Finally, the finalized themes were defined and analyzed. Rich descriptions were written incorporating relevant quotations and comparisons across data sources for triangulation.

Notewriting was used throughout to document analytic decisions and reflections. The process enhanced trustworthiness through an audit trail and introspection (Bowen, 2009), and results were reported thematically to address the research objectives.

RESULTS

Theme 1 - Misconceptions About the Value of Visual Arts Subjects

Analysis of the documents revealed widespread misconceptions regarding the importance and usefulness of visual arts subjects in Ghana (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2013; British Council, 2014). Arts courses were often not viewed as seriously as other compulsory subjects by educators, parents and students.

British Council's (2014) study reported "a lack of recognition for the arts within communities and society as a whole in Ghana" (p.16). Visual arts were frequently perceived to lack rigor or job applicability compared to courses like mathematics. This influenced lower enrolment and promotion of visual arts at the secondary level.

As described in Ghana's most recent Education Strategic Plan, "not all see the relevance of art to progress in life" resulting in limited support and resources devoted to art programmes (Ministry of Education, 2010, p.45). Studies also found visual arts subjects compromised as class sizes increased or faced budget cuts (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2013). These misconceptions posed obstacles to the growth and reputation of art disciplines in schools. Greater awareness of the cognitive, socio-emotional and career benefits of art education was deemed necessary to shift mindsets (British Council, 2014).

Theme 2 - Lack of Resources and Teacher Training

A recurring challenge noted across data sources was scarcity of materials, technology and instructional resources available to support quality art education (British Council, 2014; UNESCO, 2006). Ghana's education policy documents acknowledged limited funding prevented adequate resourcing of visual arts and other non-core subjects (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Specific resource constraints included shortages of art media and supplies, basic equipment like cameras or pottery wheels, and reference materials for art history lessons (British Council, 2014). The national curriculum framework stated many schools lacked conducive facilities for studio-based art classes (Ghana Education Service, 2007).

Compounding these issues, studies found visual arts teachers frequently did not receive subject-specific training (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2013). Continuing professional development was limited due to budget restrictions. This hampered abilities to employ innovative teaching strategies or experiential learning techniques outlined in standards (UNESCO, 2006).

The lack of resources and pedagogical capacity-building created barriers to fully realizing curricular goals of nurturing creativity and technical skills in visual arts (Ghana Education Service, 2007). Investment in material and human capital was needed to strengthen the quality and outcomes of art education.

Theme 3 - Large Class Sizes Impacting Hands-on Learning

Across the secondary schools studied, large class sizes posed challenges for arts pedagogy requiring individualized support and feedback (British Council, 2014; UNESCO, 2006). Ghana's Education Strategic Plan reported an average national ratio of 47 students to one teacher at the secondary level (Ministry of Education, 2010).

The British Council (2014) observed class sizes exceeding 50 students in some visual arts classes. This made it difficult for teachers to circulate, monitor progress and

provide constructive guidance for assignments and projects (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2013). Group critiques and demonstrations were also near impossible with such high pupil-teacher ratios.

As the national curriculum envisioned learning approaches like guided studio practices and process-oriented assignments, large classes hindered a hands-on, experimental approach (Ghana Education Service, 2007). Both studies recommended class size reductions or increased teaching support staff to allow more individualized instruction essential for art subjects (British Council, 2014; UNESCO, 2006).

Overcrowding compromised effective implementation of creative, experiential pedagogies and limited opportunities for formative feedback vital to artistic development.

Existing Recommendations from Documents Reviewed

Analysis of data sources revealed several recommendations put forth to strengthen visual arts education in Ghana. The British Council (2014) suggested promoting visual arts advocacy efforts and community engagement activities to shift misconceptions. They also called for investments in teacher professional development and learning resources.

UNESCO (2006) recommended integrating art across disciplines and leveraging local artistic talents through partnerships. Akyeampong *et al.* (2013) similarly endorsed cross-curricular approaches and suggested hiring more specialized visual arts instructors.

Ghana's education policy document outlined goals of increasing budget allocations for instructional materials and facilities conducive to visual arts learning (Ministry of Education, 2010). The national curriculum framework recommended reducing class sizes and empowering teachers through ongoing skills training (Ghana Education Service, 2007).

Stakeholders emphasized the need for multifaceted solutions addressing challenges related to perceptions, resources, pedagogy and infrastructure support systems (British Council, 2014; Akyeampong *et al.*, 2013; UNESCO, 2006). A coordinated, well-resourced approach was deemed critical to realize the full benefits of art education standards and curricula.

DISCUSSION

Key Innovative Approaches to Address Findings Community Arts Programmes

Developing visual arts programmes that engage communities can boost appreciation of art learning (Catterall & Dumais, 2012). Partnerships between schools and local galleries or performance groups could showcase student work and its impacts (Manner, 2002). This type of civic engagement may help shift misconceptions identified in Theme 1.

Technology-Driven Resources

Investing in educational technologies, such as online digital portfolios, virtual field trips or interactive learning

games, can augment limited materials (Garrett, 2010). Technology presents opportunities for visual arts instruction even in under-resourced environments as identified in Theme 2.

Co-Teaching Models

Piloting co-teaching models where other subject teachers partner with specialist art educators could help address large class sizes as per Theme 3, while building teacher capacity (Banks, 2018).

Station-teaching and small group demonstrations become more feasible.

Integrating Creative Arts Across Curriculum

Research shows integrating creative arts such as visual arts, drama and dance into core subjects can positively impact learning (Deasy, 2002). For example, students might illustrate historical events through a sketch note activity or learn mathematical equivalence through an original song. This aligns with recommendations from UNESCO (2006) and Akyeampong *et al.* (2013) captured in Theme 4.

Integrating creative arts would allow visual arts skills and concepts to complement and reinforce other subjects throughout the school day. It could boost appeal for visual arts learning while addressing large class sizes and resource constraints by spreading the tuition of art across multiple teachers. Studies demonstrate integration benefits student motivation, creativity, and academic achievement across disciplines (Deasy, 2002; Manner, 2002). With training and curricular support, schools in Ghana could harness this approach.

Promoting Exhibitions and Community Involvement

Holding student art exhibitions and cultural performances in schools and public spaces can cultivate pride in artistic talents while educating audiences on learning gains from art courses (Burnaford *et al.*, 2007). This addresses the misconceptions around relevance identified in Theme 1. Increased community involvement through volunteer initiatives and donations appeals may also generate resources as per Theme 2.

Regularly showcasing student work and involving the local community can help strengthen relationships between schools and their surroundings (Manner, 2002). Partnerships with community organizations can provide volunteering instructors or travel opportunities to cultural institutions like museums for hands-on lessons. Broadcasting achievements widely through media builds social capital for the visual arts.

Improving Teacher Professional Development

A priority should be enhancing subject-specific training and continuing education for visual arts teachers as noted in Theme 2 (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2013). Workshops, conferences and credentialing programmes can equip instructors with modern pedagogical techniques including integrating visual arts across disciplines. Targeted development helps apply student-centred approaches within

curriculum guidelines (Ghana Education Service, 2007).

In-service development sessions provide opportunities for collaborative planning and peer mentoring on classroom management strategies in large classes. Communities of practice support instructors in sharing best practices and resources (Butterfield, 2018). Investments in professional learning directly build teacher capacity essential to quality visual arts education delivery. Ongoing skills renewal empowers visual arts educators as lifelong learners.

CONCLUSIONS

This study identified several key challenges facing visual arts education at the secondary level in Ghana based on an analysis of policy documents, research and curriculum standards. There were widespread misconceptions about the value of art subjects. Visual arts courses also faced constraints such as limited resources, large class sizes, and inadequate teacher training that impeded optimal implementation of the curriculum.

However, the findings also point to potential innovative solutions that could help address these challenges. Approaches like integrating the visual arts across the curriculum, utilizing educational technologies, and facilitating community engagement show promise, based on existing research. Improving teacher professional learning and embracing team-teaching models further present opportunities to strengthen art pedagogy in Ghana.

A limitation of this study was its reliance on documentary sources without new primary data collection. Further mixed-methods research involving stakeholder consultations and case studies could provide deeper insights. There is also a need for empirical evaluation of the recommendations proposed and their impact on systemic and learning outcomes over time. Continued research is warranted to guide evolving policies, practices and investments supporting vibrant secondary visual arts education in Ghana.

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