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UNESCO World Conference on Arts Education

Building creative capacities for the twenty-first century

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Beginning in 1999, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) launched a global initiative to strengthen arts education. In 2003, Portuguese delegates to the United Nations called for a global conference to address this aim, resulting in the first-ever World Conference on Arts Education. The World Conference brought together 1,200 artists, educators, policy makers, and researchers from over ninety-seven countries in Lisbon, Portugal from March 6-9, 2006. The four main strands of the conference were: advocacy (stressing the value of cultural diversity and creativity in the post-industrial economy); the impact of arts education; strategies for promoting arts education policies; and teachers' training.

Within these strands, several themes emerged and were consistent across disciplines and nationalities:

- The classic industrialist model of teaching each subject in isolation from the others no longer provides students with the skills they will need in the context of globalization and creative economies. Children and youth will need to integrate multiple types of information to understand the world in which they live.
- The two essential skills young people need to gain from education are **critical thinking and creativity**. The arts have proven to be an essential component in teaching these skills; they provide opportunities for children and youth to think about problems in new ways, develop new and creative solutions to those problems, and communicate their ideas in a variety of contexts.
- The arts present a further opportunity for helping young people develop both **self-awareness and an appreciation for diversity**. Because most children are growing up in a more technological and diverse world than their parents did, the arts can serve both as a tool for exploring that world and a medium in which young people can build and share new values.
- Despite the opportunities they present, the **arts are usually forced to compete with rather than complement “core subjects”** like math and language arts. Opportunities for arts learning and artistic expression appear to be decreasing rather than increasing across nationalities.
- Finally, a general disconnect exists between **arts education practice and public policy making**. While arts educators and researchers continue to develop, document, and disseminate promising practices, a majority of public officials have yet to acknowledge the benefits of arts education in their policy making and funding decisions.

These themes suggest that rather than continuing to look at the arts as one of the subjects taught in school, arts education would better serve as the framework for teaching all subjects. Sir Ken Robinson, one of the opening keynote speakers and Senior Advisor to the J. Paul Getty Trust in Los Angeles, believes our current educational systems play a role in diminishing creativity by promoting learning based solely on a rational approach. He called for conference participants to re-imagine arts education in the context of a completely new framework for education, and he identified three core objectives for education that should be kept in mind if we want to prepare students for today's world: improve ways of living together, cultivate self-identity, and foster mutual understanding. Key factors in meeting these three objectives will be personal capability, confidence, and creativity.

The themes also highlight the need to bridge the gap between promising practices in arts education and public policy. Nick Rabkin of Columbia College in Chicago pointed out that public officials are more likely to be informed by personal belief systems than by research. To illustrate, he told a story about a U.S. lawmaker who attributed his funding of a fleet of fighter jets to the fact that he got to ride in one of the jets as it was shot off the deck of an aircraft carrier. Other presenters emphasized the role of the media in advocating for arts education. A consensus across nationalities, was that more attention ought to be given to convincing public officials of the value of arts learning.

Many of the concerns voiced by speakers also formed the basis of an international "Draft Road Map for Arts Education" that was presented to UNESCO Member States at this conference. The "Road Map," due to be completed this year, is designed to provide an adaptable framework that will encourage UNESCO Member States to develop their own arts education guidelines that are country and culture specific.

The South Korean Government announced that it will host a second World Conference on Arts Education in Seoul in 2008.

For more information please visit <http://www.unesco.org/culture/lea>.

Tom DeCaigny is executive director, Performing Arts Workshop. Leah Goldstein Moses is principal, The Improve Group. They attended the World Conference courtesy of the U.S. Department of Education to present evaluation findings from Performing Arts Workshop's Artists-in-Schools Demonstration Project.

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