

A Tale of Chocolate and the Arts

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Food, design and music can be enjoyed together, according to Aesthetics Subject Head, Miss Dorcas Low. She shares why an education in the Arts isn't just for the budding singer or painter. The Arts help make sense of the world – for all of us.

Creating opportunities in the Arts for everyone

“Thank you for giving me the chance to perform in front of so many people. It is my first time doing it and I had an unforgettable experience.”

I was caught by surprise when Jonathan* approached me with these words of gratitude, his boisterous self more serious than usual. I quickly ran through in my mind the various possible incidents where I might have given this Secondary 1 student, a National Cadet Corp (NCC) recruit, the opportunity to perform on stage.

I recalled it was through music lessons that Jonathan's knack for singing was discovered and he was recommended to participate in that year's Show Choir competition with the school choir. He was initially very reluctant to participate since he had never performed at a public platform before, but relented after some persuasion. The rehearsals had been gruelling in the days leading up to the competition. However, all was worth it when the choir impressed the audience with its strong vocals and stunning display of colours and movement. Amongst them stood Jonathan, who had never had the chance of performing until that day, and he was beaming with an immense sense of pride and accomplishment.

I remember fondly my own experience as a Primary School student with the privilege of having a dedicated music teacher who provided me with opportunities to perform at school events and special occasions. These had made me more confident as a person, helped build my sense of self-worth and inspired me to be a music teacher today. The appreciation from Jonathan was unexpected, but his actions and words made me realise that any opportunity given to a student could mean so much to him or her, even more so than I could imagine. It was every educator's duty to provide platforms for students to succeed, instead of leaving such opportunities to chance.

Recognising and appreciating the uniqueness in each individual

Our students come to us with different personalities, talents and intelligences, and we need to celebrate this diversity by affirming each child in his or her uniqueness.

Hazim* has a natural flair for the arts. He possesses beautiful vocals and aspires to sing like Celine Dion, Mariah Carey and other vocal powerhouse singers. He picked up the ukulele during my music lessons and saved up enough pocket money to buy one for his birthday. But he did not have the same level of motivation and interest in other aspects of his school life. Hazim missed Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) frequently and was consistently late for or missing school. He often said he “needed to take care of his younger brother” or was “not feeling well”. Expectedly, his academic results plummeted as well.

Knowing that he was very interested in singing and playing the ukulele, I linked Hazim up with a nationally televised singing competition that gave him the chance to interact with adult singers and musicians. Prior to each performance, I had to teach Hazim several Mandarin songs on the ukulele and it was tough because these were songs he did not listen to and sing. Despite that, he was ecstatic about the experience and practised very hard. We would have hour-long jamming sessions one or two days before his showcase. These practice sessions helped me to build a strong rapport with Hazim, and also a trusting relationship with his mother. Hazim performed at Orchard Road and other areas with his newfound music friends and gained an experience of a lifetime! Together with Hazim’s form teacher and CCA teacher, we also managed to motivate Hazim to attend school and CCA regularly, and he has been doing that up to this day.

Hazim’s story is one example of how an education in the Arts can develop resilience and confidence. The impact of such exposure is multiplied when we are able to incorporate the Arts into the curriculum. That’s what we did with an interdisciplinary authentic-learning project which revolved around our students’ favourite treat – chocolates.

Making the Arts relevant through innovative curriculum

It was a challenge to engage 40 Secondary Two Normal (Technical) students 3 straight hours every Friday over a span of 20 weeks, one which my colleagues and I gamely took up. We tasked them to create an advertising jingle for chocolates (Music), a chocolate packaging (Art) and chocolate truffles (Nutrition and Food Science). We also organised Learning Journeys to Awfully Chocolate and other chocolate cafés so that students could gain a multi-sensory experience. For example, when we stepped into Awfully Chocolate, we drew the students’ attention to the music that was being played in the café, the design of the space, as well as the taste of its chocolates. Such experiential learning stimulates creative and critical thinking. When students are brought out of the classroom, they experience many other ways of seeing and interpreting the world. In one instance, a student who would usually distract his classmates during regular lessons in school asked one of the most

interesting questions that day, “Why is Awfully Chocolate called awful when chocolates are supposed to be delicious?”

Through this project, our students had an authentic learning experience that was not compartmentalised into different subjects, but stretched across many disciplines, as they do in the real world. I find joy in witnessing students learn and grow through the Arts. The Arts teach them to see in multiple perspectives and appreciate how things can exist in *harmony*. By engaging students, whether in singing, dancing or painting, they realise more about themselves and discover the wonderful *rhythm* of life.

**Actual name has been changed.*