

The Ambiguities of Singapore's National Arts Council – Arts Education Programme (NAC-AEP)

Chua Lian Choon, Richard

School of Communication and Creative Arts

KDU University College

Utropolis, Glenmarie

Jalan Kontraktor U1/14,

Seksyen U1, 40150 Shah Alam

Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Email: lcchua@kdu.edu.my

Dr. Lim Kok Wai, Benny

Department of Cultural and Religious Studies

Chinese University of Hong Kong

Room 313 Leung Kau Kui Building

Shatin, New Territories

Hong Kong S.A.R, China

Email: bennylin@cuhk.edu.hk

Abstract

The National Arts Council – Arts Education Programme (NAC-AEP) was established in 1993 to broaden students' minds and deepen their artistic sensibilities, so as to contribute to a more culturally vibrant and gracious society. Assessment of more than 800 arts education programmes are conducted by a panel of arts and education experts, principals and officials from the Ministry of Education and the National Arts Council. Endorsed programmes cover the Literary, Performing and Visual Arts and are categorised into three types - *Arts Exposure*, *Arts Experience* and *Arts Excursion*. This paper identifies three key ambiguities within the NAC-AEP that are preventing the programme from attaining success. First and foremost, the values and importance of the arts to the society are not clearly presented to the students through the programmes. Secondly, the current meager assessment system of the NAC-AEP is highly administrative and requires extensive form-filling, which may not be necessary. Finally, the mentality of the students involved in the NAC-AEP is not taken into serious consideration. Many activities are contrary to the interests and preferences of the students. Moreover, the NAC-AEP has also failed to catch up with the evolution of the digital media in its planning and content.

Keywords

Arts Education, Audience Development, Applied Drama, Assessment of NAC-AEP, Singapore Cultural Statistics, Functions of the Arts

Introduction

The National Arts Council (NAC) of Singapore was formed in 1991 with the specific aim to develop the direction and policies of the arts in Singapore (Oon, 2001). NAC has some grant schemes in place to assist artists or arts organizations to develop projects. It also runs the Arts Education Programme (AEP), more commonly known as the NAC-AEP. It was introduced in 1993, three years after the formation of its parent agency. It is worthy to note at this point that arts education, in the context of this paper, refers to arts programmes run outside the formal school's curriculum. These programmes are usually not graded and meant for collective learning outcomes. Since its inception, the NAC-AEP programme has been the leading promoter in arts education, focusing on helping *arts organisations create arts exposure programmes to engage and develop future audiences* (Lim, 2009). According to the latest NAC's annual report 2013/14, over 350 local schools have booked some 800 arts programmes registered in the NAC-AEP database, benefiting about 300,000 students¹. Despite the existence of NAC-AEP for over 20 years, certain data is still unclear and unavailable. First and foremost, the actual expenditure on arts education is never made known. Although an amount of S\$1.5million (approximately USD\$1.15 million) was indicated as the expenditure in arts education in the latest annual report, there was a note to explain that the amount also included the expenses for community arts. On top of that, there was also a lack of statistics on the funding given to arts organizations for their respective arts education initiatives. Next, as a tool for audience development, there has never been any information or statistics as to how the NAC-AEP has fulfilled this implicit mission in the last 20 years. Data collection in these areas will improve the process of evaluating the effectiveness of the outcomes of NAC-AEP. However, within the programme itself, there exists several ambiguities that need addressing, and this is even more crucial than evaluating the outcomes, i.e., the non-existence of the data mentioned.

An Overview of Arts Education Programmes in Singapore

Singapore's cultural development can be traced back to over 20 years ago, when a high level committee - the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA) - was set up to realise the vision of a culturally vibrant society. The 1989 seminal report of the ACCA jumpstarted Singapore's cultural development by recommending improvements to the infrastructure, the organizational structures and the education system, alongside greater promotional efforts for arts and culture. The ACCA recognized the importance of arts and culture in Singapore – mainly to broaden Singaporeans' minds and deepen their artistic sensibilities; to improve their overall quality of life; to contribute to a more culturally vibrant and gracious society. Over the years, the ACCA's vision has seemingly come to life. New and upgraded museums, the establishment of the Esplanade, transformation of the library landscape, and the formation of the NAC, National Heritage Board (NHB) and National Library Board (NLB) are among the key developments arising from the ACCA report. Moving forward, from initiated studies NAC carried out -- which culminated into three Renaissance City Reports (RCP) in the early millennium -- to the most recently released 110-page report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review Committee (ACSR), the NAC has been diligently

carrying out plans that will bring the aspirations in these reports to its fruition. One of the plans is the NAC-AEP.

The arts education component in NAC is a sub-division of *Audience Engagement*, a strong indication of the instrumental role arts education has in the country. The NAC-AEP was first launched as part of the audience development division, with aims to *develop initiatives that advocate the value and importance of arts education*, as well as to *connect the arts community with the education sector and supports the professional development of arts educators and arts education providers*². Within the different sections in the NAC-AEP, the highest number of programmes (more than 50%) offered and taken up by schools are the drama education programmes. Many of these are the Arts Experience workshops, held in co-curricular (CCA) time (Stinson, 2004). Assessment of more than 800 arts education programmes are conducted by a panel of experts, principals and officials from the Ministry of Education and the NAC. Endorsed programmes cover the Literary, Performing and Visual Arts and are categorised into three types - *Arts Exposure, Arts Experience and Arts Excursion (3Es)*. Arts Exposure refers to bringing visual and performing arts events into schools so that students can learn to appreciate the arts from within the comforts of their school environment. Arts Experience involves a more practical approach whereby students are given the opportunity to learn about the arts by being directly involved in the art-making process. Finally, the Arts Excursion, as the word *excursion* suggests, involves bringing students out of school to attend visual and performing arts events. Local schools could browse through the database, set up by NAC-AEP, to purchase suitable programmes through the application of a TOTE Board³ subsidy to defray the cost of purchasing the programme. For instance, a local school could purchase a programme priced at S\$1000 for S\$400 (40%), as the remaining 60% will be paid off by TOTE Board.

For Arts Experience programmes, the names of teachers are also on the database. In order for one to teach in one or more programmes, interested teachers are required to submit their credentials to NAC-AEP division for assessment and approval. Existing teachers' assessment only ensures that teachers should have a minimum of two years teaching experience and a diploma-level qualification in the relevant artistic form. Presently, there is no formal assessment on the quality of the arts education programmes, albeit random feedbacks from school teachers on programmes taught by the teachers. NAC-AEP officers, who are mainly administrators with no content knowledge, would also attend some AEP sessions to have an idea on how programmes are being conducted and received by the students and teachers. There is no end-assessment from students taking the drama education programme. In addition, teachers are also required to submit their assessment rubrics to NAC-AEP. It is a new system introduced in 2012. The purpose of implementing the rubrics is to encourage artists or arts organizations to be more reflective in their teaching practice and also to gather more information about the effectiveness of the arts education programme on the whole.

The NAC-AEP is not the only arts education initiative by NAC. The other initiative is the Artists-in-School Scheme, whereby a school can collaborate with a practising Singaporean artist to develop

a more substantial arts culture within the school This scheme allows artists to go into schools for up to two years, with up to 50% (70% for special schools) of funding provided by NAC. There has also been instances where arts organizations initiate their own arts education programmes. One example is The Fun Stage, an active, non-profit theatre company in Singapore between 2001 and 2009. The company initiated a series of drama education programmes, similar to that of NAC-AEP's Arts Exposure programme. The Fun Stage, however, did not submit through the NAC-AEP portal. Instead, the company positioned drama education as a form of corporate social responsibility for corporates and managed to secure corporate sponsorships. Between 2005 and 2009, the company delivered over 300 performances and reached out to more than 200,000 primary and secondary school students⁴.

Arts Education – A Contextual Discussion

The NAC-AEP was set up as a means to make Singapore a more culturally vibrant society through improving the artistic sensibilities of its population from young. Implicitly, it serves to develop future audiences so as to perpetuate the vibrancy of the arts scene in Singapore. The Ministry of Education, Singapore runs the formal arts curriculum, which focuses mainly on music and visual arts training. When the students graduate from their secondary school, they would have gone through years of formal music and visual arts training (as stipulated by MOE), as well as been involved in a variety of visual and performing arts activities through the NAC-AEP initiatives. If we pause and think over it, how would such involvement make Singapore more exciting culturally? While the involvement may be important, we are suggesting that this action of being involved cannot be the most fundamental contribution to a culturally vibrant society. In fact, the supposed involvement will not have any substantial impact if the students do not understand the rationale behind the actions. One thing is for sure - the arts are actually deemed as important for Singapore. The existence of a working cultural policy supports our statement. Moreover, the government has put in place several agencies and initiatives for the arts, including the NAC-AEP. Finally, arts organizations in Singapore are allowed to register as charities, which mean that they can receive donations and issue receipts to donors for tax-exemptions. Yet this begs the basic question - what is the value of the arts for Singapore?

Professor C.J. Wan-Ling Wee (2002) mentioned that the state (Singapore) support in the arts is crucial if cultural production *is not to be reduced to the level of simple manufactures*. This statement, when applied to the NAC-AEP, brings about several thoughts. At the onset, the fundamental values of the arts are unlikely to be transferred to the students. The 3Es, in actual operation, are very outcome-oriented. An arts performance travels to a school, performs and leaves. An artist brings a training programme into a school, delivers it and leaves. Likewise, students visit a museum and leave thereafter. This involvement of students in a performance, a training programme, or a visitation of an existing exhibition is not unlike what Wee has described as *manufactures*, or products. In the same statement, Wee (2002) mentioned about the symbolic values of cultural productions and how they represent a *larger symbolic life of the city-state*. This further reiterates the

importance of the values in bringing about cultural development, rather than the production itself. If NAC-AEP wants to contribute to the success of Singapore being culturally vibrant, the basic values of the arts must be identified and transferred to the students.

“It is known that the arts of a society reflect the culture and indicate the conditions that govern the society. Artists and members of the society, reflect, in their arts, the society's beliefs, ideologies, and concerns. Sociological and anthropological studies confirm that the artists and the societies they live in are interrelated, inspiring, and that they influence each other. ...More than the illustration of the culture of the society, a fundamental role of the arts of a society is to project the individual artist's perceptions of various trends, to point out the existing contradictions, and to predict the outcome of both.”

(Metallinos, 2013)

The quote by Professor Metallinos implies that the arts reflect and project the culture and the existing conditions of a society. This explains why we visit museums or performing arts when we travel to a particular place – to understand the place. This function of the arts also supports the notion that the arts should not be subjected to censorship, as it makes little sense that only a certain portion of the society can be reflected or projected, and not the rest. Singapore is known for its strict censorship system in place, and a number of arts events have been banned over the years (Abshire, 2011). Censorship serves as barrier for the fundamental *values* of the arts to function, and this will, in turn, affect and slow down Singapore's desire to become a culturally vibrant city (symbolic life of the city-state as mentioned by Wee).

“So what lies ahead for applied drama education? As this version of our 30-year history demonstrates, the individual's drive and passion must be equally matched by discerning cultural and educational policies to better integrate arts within education.”

(Noorlinah Mohamed, 2011).

It is also possible to look at arts education from an applied drama perspective. Though the focus is on drama, it provides insights and new ideas to the concept of arts education beyond the realm of formal arts curriculum in schools. The quote above highlights the passionate words of Singapore drama educator/ academic Noorlinah Mohamed, who has put in enormous effort to document the development of applied drama education in Singapore. In the most basic sense of the word, applied drama uses drama as a vehicle for change. In John William Somers' (2008) paper titled *Interactive Theatre: Drama as Social Intervention*, his optimism in drama being an effective agent of change is documented through the presentation of the different ways theatre, and other forms of drama, could excite change. He categorized these changes as *soft* and *hard* interventions. A hard change is a well-defined attempt to confront audiences or workshop participants with particular issues, while soft changes involve making and performing drama as well as the participation of others in witnessing them. According to him, drama manifests itself in different permutations: *Drama as Social Intervention; Theatre and Social Change; Theatre for Change; Applied Drama; Applied Theatre*

and *Theatre for Development* – but in each and every one of them, there is an intention to achieve change by creating the circumstances in which people experience optimum conditions, resulting in shifts of personal knowledge, values and attitudes. To sum it all, what's most important is that there is an intention to excite change. Considering Somers' theories, is the NAC-AEP seeking for any particular *soft* changes through the arts?

A leading researcher in applied theatre Judith Ackroyd (2007) has got her musings on the term applied theatre/drama refined through her paper *Applied Theatre: An Exclusionary Discourse?*, where it suggests that the term applied theatre has moved from *being an umbrella term to refer to a range of particular forms of theatre practice sharing specific common features, to become a term referring to a specific form itself*. However, it has also become a restricted, even an exclusive, theatre form. In her study, through the use of well-known play texts and performances, she drew a continuum, rather than categorical distinction between theatre and applied theatre, identifying intentionality as common in the activities, of two axes measuring transformation and participation. Her results show that applied theatre [drama] fell into the quadrant high in both of the categories. Rather to call for a celebration, she was highly vigilant of the use of the term. She traced the use of words *applied theatre* in many different international journals, hinting on the excessive privileging of the term, probably against its counterpart *drama-in-education*. In her study, a couple of factors mattered. One involves the context of time where applied drama is currently being looked upon as careers by researchers and academics, of whom mobility has expanded from one university department of education to a theatre one. The concept of applied theatre has more relevance than drama-in-education. Two, it is about the term's growing international scholarship, where the word *applied* has taken more media attention. However, according to Ackroyd, focus on learning for its own sake has lost out to greater attention given to it by the role higher education engage in developing national competitiveness in a global age. With higher education providing training for better skills, economic growth is encouraged. Applied theatre form is more appealing to the government's more mechanistic agenda. In NAC-AEP, should focus be given to the *arts* or the *education*?

Assessment of the Arts Education Programme

In their study on learning in higher education, Wilson and Scalise (2006) have argued for a case in support of an assessment. They discovered that curriculum planners have focused on good programme designs but learning outcomes are not well monitored. They are not referring to physical assessment systems, but the on-going *embedded* assessments teachers have been carrying out, either consciously or unconsciously. A piece of homework, a laboratory procedure, a classroom discussion, an essay – all are considered embedded forms of assessment. What's important here is the notion that an embedded form of assessment might potentially be the window to thinking about the form of assessment that an arts education programme could take shape. Therefore, the argument on whether an assessment is a have-, or have-not, might not be constructive, but to focus on the

argument that assessments should be a tangible end-process instrument or an on-going system *embedded* within the curriculum might be more helpful.

It was not until 2012 where NAC-AEP introduced an outcome-based approach where teachers of the NAC-AEP are required to be more focused on measuring a stated objective, focusing on what's learned than what's taught. Such assessment policy is difficult to achieve, for it is difficult on teachers' side to quantify a learning outcome based on what students' have learnt. Teachers tend to focus more on experimental activities and experiences. It is difficult to quantify experiences. In addition, all teachers will have to physically login to the NAC-AEP website to report their past activities. In the system, only these data items are required:

- a. The target audience of the applied drama programme.
- b. The learning objectives of the applied drama programme.
- c. The outline of the applied drama programme.
- d. The lesson plans of the applied drama programmes

Every reporting entry is brief and general, not to mention, descriptive. Descriptions of how the programme is carried out filled more than half of the reporting process. In the column of expected learning outcomes, objectives of first principle nature are written.

“Drama in education programmes has become complicated over time. They began very simply. Drama processes were used to build imagination and confidence using language. When we first began introducing drama in schools, we did drama for the sake of drama. The teachers who engaged us wanted children to know drama, nothing more ...Shortly thereafter, drama became the means to other ends. The flood gates for this opened when the Ministry of Education created a strong impetus for students to be creative, expressive, and to speak better. We began generating programmes such as Drama for Communication, for Debating Skills, for Presentation, each aimed at achieving specific goals. Performance became the benchmark for deliverables. Hence, drama quickly became product-driven and not process-driven, with a greater emphasis on tangible outcomes.”

(Lim-Yang, 2011)

The statement by Act 3 International's artistic director, Ruby Lim-Yang, further reiterates the shift of arts education towards a more product-driven (as aligned to Wee's discussion on *manufactures*) approach. Noorlinah Mohamed's (2011) study seems to also indicate the ongoing situation of the struggle between a product-driven outcome based and process-based outcome arts education in this present day. Anchoring on the 110-page ACSR report's direction to provide higher quality arts education programmes to students, NAC's recent introduction of the meagre assessment system for evaluating arts educators is going in the right direction. However, there seems to be a resource allocation challenge – the number of administrators in the NAC-AEP division is not proportionate the number of programmes run in schools. The process of submitting teachers' curriculum vitae is a

good principle, but a challenge to implement. The teachers could be approved by the panel, but the criteria are unclear. In addition, there is no assessment system to collate student feedbacks. Student feedbacks are carried out at the local school level, and is not submitted to NAC-AEP.

Read (1958) warns against the effects on arts (applied drama) education when governments attempt to manage their learning outcomes. In Singapore's case, Read's theoretical observation has got reference. In the quest to produce a good product-based outcome from these arts education programmes, the attempt to introduce teachers' assessment through a routine submission of CVs at the entry point seems to be more of an after-thought than a part of the overall architecture of the development of arts education in Singapore. For the control Singapore has levied on its people, in its quest to be the Asian modern, emphasizing on developing Singapore as a cosmopolitan city, encouraging Singaporean to be more internationally connected has resulted in further fragmentation and disintegration of Singaporeans within the country (Wee, 2007). Hence it is logical to deduce that the recent introduction of teachers' assessment as a counter-measure to balance the repercussions of the initial ACCA report and the three renaissance city reports on the development of the quality of arts educators in Singapore.

The Audience Mentality

“Arts marketers often ask how they can attract more people to attend their organizations' performance. An important consideration is not just identifying the factors that will entice people to attend but also identifying and breaking down the barriers that prevent people from attending.”

(Bernstein, 2011)

Audience building for the arts is a long-term project. People often dislike uncertainties and it takes time and effort for one to be comfortable enough to walk into a museum to view an exhibition or into a theatre to catch a performance. Therefore, as the quote suggests, audience development is really not just about finding ways to attract people to participate but to identify and address the barriers. In this sense, the NAC-AEP seems to have taken the first step to equip all primary and secondary students with some knowledge of the arts, thus, removing the barrier of the lack of such knowledge, which is a major barrier to many who are born before the 1980s (before the existence of NAC-AEP). However, one important barrier in audience development is often neglected – the psychological and behavioral factor. The NAC-AEP may have taken the first step to break down a major barrier of the lack of knowledge in the arts, but the actions taken to break down this barrier have failed to consider the psychological and behavioral patterns of the students. For instance, secondary school students, whose ages are between 13 and 17 years old, are considered teenagers. Teenagers, in today's context, are more sophisticated about lifestyles and even money (Wright, 2006). In this digital age, teenagers are very well informed about certain phenomenon and even if they are unaware of specific new trends, they prefer to discover these trends themselves, rather than being told (Apter, 2004). If we look closely into the 3Es of the NAC-AEP, there are obvious

disparities. Teenagers (students) will find it unexciting or *uncool* to be coerced, as a cohort, to sit through an art performance in the school hall, to go through a compulsory drama workshop after class, or to visit museums in school uniforms and be demanded to be disciplined so as to uphold the school's image.

Here, we are faced with this situation - the NAC-AEP has been unsuccessful in catching up with the digital age, whereas the audience are very much in-tune with what's going on in the digital media sphere. For the last two decades, the 3Es have remained more or less unchanged, let alone responding to the new media phenomenal. Performances in the school halls during assembly sessions have more or less remained the same, including the general storylines (which usually share certain morals and values) and the size of the performers, which is restricted due to the budget constraints. The development of technology and the Internet has allowed for uploads or even live streaming of performances in HD quality. Despite losing the *live* experience, there are opportunities for students to be exposed to high quality performances by world-renowned arts organizations just within a click of the mouse. The same goes for Arts Excursions, where visits are usually timed and in a rigid atmosphere. Google has, in recent years, developed the Google Cultural Institute, whereby one can visit UNESCO's World Heritage Sites in a 360 degrees view. The rise of virtual museums presents opportunities for students to visit arts exhibitions beyond the Singapore shore. All these possibilities are seemingly neglected by NAC.

Conclusion

The NAC-AEP was established with very grand objectives to enhance the level of arts appreciation amongst the students in schools, so as to move Singapore towards a more cultured society. However, before one can comment and evaluate the outcomes of the arts education programmes at its entirety, there lie several ambiguities within the programmes themselves. It goes back to the very basic values of the arts and why the arts are deemed important. Without this foundation, it would be tedious to develop an effective arts education programme. Next, the meagre system of assessment of the NAC-AEP has to be reconsidered. By assessment, it is not about testing the students, but as a means to evaluate the effectiveness of the entire programme. The current assessment system is a highly administrative one that requires a lot of form-filling at the expense of effectiveness and logic. Finally, the NAC-AEP has also failed in the understanding the students' psychological and behavioral patterns. Students, in today's context, are a lot more media and tech savvy and in order for arts education programmes to be effective, NAC needs to factor in the students' preferences in these areas. It is hoped that this paper will bring about discussions amongst the stakeholders of arts education in Singapore.

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Notes

¹ Refer to the 2013/14 annual report at <https://www.nac.gov.sg/about-us/annual-report/overview>

² Refer to the NAC-AEP portal at <https://aep.nac.gov.sg/nacaep/nacaep.html>

³ Established on 1 January 1988, Tote Board (Singapore Totalisator Board) holds the legal right to operate Horse racing and totalisator operations through its agent and proprietary club, the Singapore Turf Club; and 4D, Toto, Singapore Sweep and sports betting through its agent and wholly-owned subsidiary, Singapore Pools (Private) Limited. Tote Board also manages its funding activities from the gaming surpluses generated from the operations of Singapore Turf Club and Singapore Pools, and from the casino entry levies. The arts grant is one of the funding schemes.

⁴ Refer to webpage archive of The Fun Stage's arts education programmes, retrieved from the National Library Board of Singapore, at <http://goo.gl/bW0iQV>