



ARTS EDUCATION: AN UNEXPECTED TOOL IN THE QUEST FOR A SAFER WORLD

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KEY EVENTS

On April 23, 2021, Erita Lee Acham Chen presented *Arts Education: An Unexpected Tool in the Quest for a Safer World* at the 2021 CASIS Generation Z Congress. The presentation was followed by a moderated question and answer period. Key points of discussion included the current situation for township youths in South Africa, how performing arts non-governmental organizations (NGO) have provided vulnerable youths with a safe place, and how the skills learned in these programs have had a positive impact on their lives.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Erita Chen discussed her research on the impact of arts education on youths in Cape Town, South Africa. The discussion focused primarily on the positive outcomes of students involved in two NGO performing arts programs, Jazzart Dance Theatre and Amoyo Performing Arts Foundation, as well as the benefit to society in reducing gang involvement, substance abuse, and unsafe reproductive health.

Question Period

During the question period, the discussion focused primarily on how skills learned in arts programs apply to other areas of students' lives, and whether arts education can provide foundational life skills for people in the field of intelligence and security.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

Post-apartheid South Africa has a large economy; however, 1 in 5 people are still living in extreme poverty - the majority of whom are colored. Township youths are particularly vulnerable to gang culture, drug use, and violence. In fact, more than 40% of under-privileged youths in Cape Town are arrested before the age of 29 and the average age of drug experimentation is 12 years old. Moreover, approximately 40% of under-privileged youths had multiple experiences of violence in their homes, schools, and communities. This may be because many parents are forced to spend long hours outside of their homes for work, leaving children home alone and unsupervised from a young age. There is also a much higher student to teacher ratio in poorly funded schools, leaving little one-on-one support for students. These circumstances arguably leave youths vulnerable to bad influences and criminality.

There are several arts NGOs in South Africa that play an important role to empower underprivileged youths at a grass-roots level by providing a safe-space and one-on-one support during after-school hours. Jazzart Dance Theatre was the first multi-racial modern-day dance company in South Africa that sought to challenge the status quo and celebrate uniqueness. Their program not only taught technical dance skills and choreography, but professionalism, commitment, communication, and discipline as well. Similarly, Amoyo Performing Arts Foundation provided free arts education including dance, drama, music, performance, and public speaking.

Both programs provided a supportive environment that enforced safety, security, and positive mental health while steering vulnerable youth away from negative influences. Instructors were able to focus on the individual and utilized positive reinforcement, which allowed students to feel comfortable expressing themselves. The various courses taught through arts, NGOs allowed for self-expression and exposed vulnerabilities which built trust among students and instructors. Students often became more open to the NGOs' social workshops designed to raise awareness and provide education on taboo subjects like reproductive health, gang violence, and substance abuse.

Through interviews with Jazzart and Amoyo's students, the speaker discovered that these NGO programs helped many students with communication skills and building confidence in everyday life. Students were compelled to think outside the box which helped foster critical thinking skills and creativity. Students began to achieve better grades in school and were better prepared for job interviews,

due to the communication skills they learned through their program. One student was heading down a problematic path, skipping school, selling drugs, and becoming involved in gang activity. After being recruited by Amoyo, the student stopped selling drugs and went back to school. After 1 year in the program, the same student was selected as head of his class and was offered a 3-year training internship. Just by keeping students away from negative influences and providing a secure place to grow, Jazzart had a 100% employment record for graduates.

Overall, students involved in NGO arts programs displayed higher self-esteem, improved confidence, and a general shift to socially productive behaviours. Negative influences were often renounced, and students were better prepared to handle life's challenges. NGO arts programs have been shown to be a simple solution, with high social-impact and low cost, which puts them in a unique position to tackle social issues like gang involvement and substance abuse.

Question Period

Regarding other areas of life, the skills taught by arts can be applied in the future lives of students in various ways. For example, communications skills learned through drama were immensely helpful for students in their school and job performance. Students learned how to project their voice and how to use tone to tell a story, which improved students' presentation and interview skills. After attending programs through Amoyo, students were able to get better grades and received better feedback from their teachers because they became more effective public speakers.

Arts can also provide foundational life skills and a creative outlet for those not already able to express themselves. For those in the intelligence field, for example, arts can be used to get in touch with a different set of skills and allow them to physically express themselves through dance, instead of resorting to violence. Dance and arts can be powerful because of the symbolic meaning behind them. In terms of security, when Gen Zs are exposed to negative experiences online, Arts can let them have an outlet to express their frustration and anger in a positive way.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- Despite South Africa having a large economy, 1 in 5 people are still living in extreme poverty, leaving township youths vulnerable to gang culture, drug abuse and violence.

- NGOs such as Jazzart Dance Theatre and Amoyo Performing Arts Foundation offer under-privileged youths a safe space to go after school that deters them from criminality.
- Students participate in dance, drama, and singing programs, which builds trust among students and fosters creativity, self-expression, and vulnerability. Students develop improved communication and critical thinking skills which better prepares them for life's challenges.
- Skills learned through such programs are applied to other areas of their lives, resulting in better attendance in school, higher grades, and better employment opportunities, as well as reduced gang involvement and decreased substance use.
- NGOs are in a good position to tackle issues like gang involvement, substance abuse and reproductive health and have been shown to be a simple solution with high social impact, at low cost.

Question Period

- The skills learned through arts can be applied to all areas of life. For example, communication skills learned through theatre arts have proven to be immensely helpful for students in school and job performance.
- Arts can provide foundational life skills for those in the security and intelligence field, by allowing individuals to get in touch with a different set of skills and allow them to physically express themselves through dance, instead of resorting to violence.



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