

## ***Reimagining Art-based Pedagogical Possibilities for COVID-19-Motivated Children School Attendance Problems in Nigeria***

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines art-based pedagogical avenues applicable in mitigating school attendance problems in Nigeria, particularly the students COVID-19 helped in keeping away from school after lockdown ease. The article recognizes various submissions that Nigeria has the highest school dropout rate and attendance problem in Africa before COVID-19; however, the situation seems to have grown worse because of COVID-19. A recent UNESCO report presents a huge 40 million COVID-19 related out of school cases in Nigeria. Nineteen percent of this figure is traced to the lower and upper basic education sector. This means that many pupils are yet to return to school since school reopened. It also implies that COVID-19 school closure has further deepened pupils' school adjustment difficulties. Thus, the paper looks at the need for pedagogical approaches that will help in endearing children to embrace school. One of such approaches is the Art-based Learning. Consequently, three art-based learning models are discussed in this paper. They are: Constructive Collaboration between Specialist Art Teachers and Generalist Teachers; Visual Art Integration Approach, and Periodic Training in Artistic Engagement for Generalist Teachers. It is believed that these creativity-driven methods, if adopted, will help curb students' school attendance problem.*

**Keywords:** arts, integration COVID-19, constructive, collaboration, dropout

### **Introduction**

The outbreak of COVID-19 Pandemic dealt a devastating blow on the world's social system in a manner that cannot be forgotten easily. Its ravaging impact on the health system, recording different figures of death toll across the world; its associated fear and anxiety that forced many countries of the world to close down their economy; the yet unrecovered fall in the oil market; the crippled culture and tourism industries and the resultant heightened poverty level, particularly in the third world countries, among others. The impact of COVID-19 on the Education sector across the world seems to be peculiar. History has revealed that of different plagues and pandemics that have ever struck humanity, (Black Death 1346-1353; Spanish flu 1918-1920; the West African Ebola epidemic 2013-2016), Coronavirus is the first to shut down educational system across the

world concurrently (UNESCO, 2020; MuthuLakshmi & Archana, 2020). In Nigeria, as in many parts of the world, where public and private schools were closed, varying degrees of consequences were experienced. Among other effects, school closure seems to have further deepened students' school attendance and adjustment problems. This is perceived to be the case for many children of school age in Nigeria as reports, both anecdotal and research findings, revealed that many children are yet to return to school months after school reopening (Agbele & Oyelade, 2020; Obiakor & Adeniran, 2020).

The trend also substantiates the assertion that the more children stay away from school, the more difficult it is to get them reintegrated to school. Thus, the study looks at the need for pedagogical approaches that will make them embrace school. One of such approaches is the art-based learning. Consequently, three art-based learning models are discussed in this paper. They are: Constructive Collaboration between Specialist Art Teachers and Generalist Teachers; Visual Art Integration Approach, and Periodic Training in Artistic Engagement for Generalist Teachers.

### **School attendance problem in Nigeria before COVID-19**

Students' school attendance problems range from lateness to school, unauthorized absenteeism, classroom ill-adjustment, and outright school refusal, among others. Before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, school attendance problem has been a major concern for parents, care givers, school managements and government at all levels. The phenomenon has attracted quite a sizeable scholarly attention (Fareo, 2013; Sa'ad, Sabo & Dahuwa, 2015; Onyechi, Eseadi, Ugwuozor, Omeje & Ngwoke, 2016).

Consequently, a number of intervention strategies, ranging from school-based (Moula, 2020; Witts, & Houlihan, 2007), home-based, and combination of both approaches (Kotirde & Yonus, 2014) have been proffered. Unfortunately, the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent closure of schools seem to have frustrated efforts by the schools and parents to mitigate school attendance difficulties. In a newly released UNESCO school attendance rates, it has been revealed that a whopping 40 million out-of-school incidences in Nigeria are COVID-19-motivated, and that 91% percent of this figure which traces to the lower and upper basic education sector are yet to return to school, even after the ease of lockdown and subsequent reopening of schools (UNESCO, 2020). From the foregoing, it is evident that school closure for such a long time has not only deepened students' school adjustment difficulties, it has also resulted in a serious drawback in the search for strategies for curbing school attendance problems in Nigeria. The current situation calls for an urgent need for creativity, reimagining and innovation in an attempt to reintegrate vulnerable children to school. Pedagogical approaches that are capable of endearing such children to the learning environment, something that arts have in abundance, must be sought; hence, a reconsideration for art-based learning.

### **The concept of art-based learning**

Generally, art in its broadly defined sense encompasses all creativity-driven activities such as painting, singing, drawing, among others. Each of these has its unique pedagogical

possibilities that when explored can endear students to learning, particularly those with social and adjustment difficulty. Across cultures and disciplines, history reveals the use of art as basis for learning. From the pre-historic cave painting (Siler, 2011), “Mandaladrawing, a Buddhist religious meditative concept that projects the mental cohesion by creating a pictorial representation of complex emotional conflicts” (Henderson, & Rosen, 2007), Egyptian classical symbolic writings called Hieroglyphics (Alu & Oyeoku, 2016), the ancient Nsibidi symbols popularized by the Igbo and Efik people of Southern Nigeria, among others are legendary human traditions that foreground the concept of Art-based Learning.

An analysis of John Dewey’s definition of art gives a deeper insight. “To feel the meaning of what one is doing, and to rejoice in that meaning; to unite in one concurrent fact the unfolding of the inner life and the ordered development of material conditions” (Dewey, 1977, p292). These ancient humanistic practices reveal art as an adaptive human behaviour fundamental for learning. However, the centrality of creative engagement in Art Based Learning (ABL) makes it distinct from the broad study of human activities mentioned above.

In the contemporary practice, ABL describes the process of facilitating learning by engaging the pedagogic elements in artistic expressions. ABL has theoretical underpinnings in Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (1984), whose basic tenet lies in students’ active participation and reflective observation for effective learning. From a constructivist perspective, Gardner (1985) deepens the understanding of the role art plays in humans’ development of multiple modes of intelligence. In a more pragmatic manner, Upitis (2005) posits that teaching and learning in, about, and through the arts can reach more students than schooling by traditional means alone. From research perspective, McNiff (1998) calls ABL “an application of larger epistemological process of artistic knowing and enquiry.” (p26). These, among other numerous accounts, reveal art as an adaptive human behaviour fundamental to learning.

There are two broad approaches to the use of art disciplines - visual arts, music, theatre - to facilitate learning process. One is called reflective observation, in which students’ sensory channels are keenly open to experience artistic process. The other involves students’ active engagement in the actual artistic process (Kendra & Wanda, 2013). In the former approach, the art product occupies the centre place, while in the latter approach, art product is subordinated to the actual artistic process. Although, comparative analysis of each of these approaches reveals the efficacy of one over the other in different disciplines, engineering (Osburn & Stock, 2005), management (Kerr & Lloyd, 2008), medical (Kidd & Connor, 2008), education (Hughes, 2011), among others; however, common to the two approaches is that art as both the product and process is a viable tool for facilitating ABL.

### **Teaching of art in Nigeria**

The current art teaching landscape in Nigeria is supposed to be congruent with the concept of ABL. Following the combination of three separate art disciplines (Visual Art, Music and Drama) into a single curricular body called Creative and Cultural Arts (CCA), art education curriculum in Nigeria took a more collaborative and child-centered shape. A careful consideration of some of the objectives of CCA curriculum reveals its consistency with the concept of Art-based Learning.

I. First, the idea of Creative and Cultural Arts (CCA) drew heavily on the notion that teaching with and through the arts, as described by Upitis (2005), can serve as a cross-curricular pedagogic tool for navigating other curricular areas in more engaging ways.

II. Likewise, its particular emphasis on the intellectual, social, emotional, and kinesthetic (psychomotor) development of the Nigerian child makes CCA curriculum similar to ABL framework.

III. Unified CCA has a potential for students' development of a vast language of expressing ideas, feelings, and mood, through variety of art expressions (drama, music, dance, fine and applied arts); implying that CCA is in the right place for developing collaborative spirit in children.

IV. More so, CCA has a particular consideration for children's aesthetic awareness, good taste and a sense of judgment.

Unfortunately, effective implementation of the CCA curriculum, which is congruent with the concept of ABL, is hindered by a number of challenges. More so, the use of ABL in a manner that will facilitate learning across disciplines as well as reduce the rate of absenteeism, mal-adjustment and different nomenclatures of school attendance problem will require more than what CCA has to offer. Some of the challenges are highlighted hereunder.

#### **1. Methodological issues**

Methodological approach constitutes one major requirement for successful implementation of curricular objectives. Unfortunately, the rote learning approach is still being used to teach fine arts and music in Nigeria (Onuora-Oguno & Ezeugwu, 2017). Such learning strategies as experiential learning, active learning, investigative learning and learning through play are believed to provoke brainstorming, analogical thinking, transformational thinking, visualization, association and consequently, code-switching.

#### **2. Art teachers' qualification**

Grierson (2003) considered the qualification of art teachers as an important factor in harnessing the therapeutic value of art education. Aina and Olanipekun (2015) identified seven indicators of teacher-qualification that broadens its meaning beyond mere certification in a discipline. Among them are:

- I. Teachers' formal education in the subject matter of teaching
- II. Teacher education in pedagogical studies
- III. Duration of the preparation period
- IV. Certification and licensing status

- V. Years of experience
- VI. Preparation in professional development
- VII. Specialty and expertise.

According to Aina and Olanipekun, many teachers who facilitate CCA course contents are deficient in many of these areas. Since the quality of art teaching students get determines the possibility that engagement will facilitate any positive attitude to learning, not much is expected from teachers who themselves do not have much to offer.

### **3. Specialty and expertise**

No tangible outcome should be expected from a situation where teaching of fine arts at primary school level is administered by generalist teachers who have no background in arts. This, in Owolabi's (2013) view, results in lack of confidence and artistic skill of art teachers to engage students. In many such cases, generalist teachers express frustration and confusion as they grapple with the challenges of confidence and competence, poor self-efficacy, low perceptions of their own visual arts skills, lack of pre-service training in visual arts education, and in particular, necessary support needed from the school itself. Coincidentally, some of the challenges identified as hindrances to effective implementation of CCA curriculum are basic requirements for occurrence of Art-based Learning. Kendra and Wanda (2013) outlined a number of antecedents for ABL; among them are:

- I. Learner must be willing to engage in the type of active learning, which occurs in a learning environment that is not highly prescribed.
- II. The teacher must also be willing to tolerate a level of uncertainty, enabling the change of teaching style from being an information transmitter to a facilitator of an integrated learning process.
- III. Integration between the disciplines, which implies that consultation with an artist/art-teacher is important when preparing art-based activities.
- IV. Consultation with an artist may also include formal instruction in art analysis, such as when nursing students visit an art gallery.

From the foregoing, it is evident that if visual art teaching will be of any positive influence to mitigate the dramatic absenteeism, mal-adjustment, school drop-out among other nomenclatures of school attendance problem, far more than the shallow CCA curriculum contents will be required.

### **Reconstructing art-based pedagogical possibilities**

#### **1. Constructive collaboration between the generalist teachers and creative art teachers in primary schools**

One major way of maximizing creative arts education as a strategy for correcting students' school attendance problem in the post COVID-19 world is to consider Tomljenović (2018) collaborative teaching between the generalist teachers and creative art teachers. This idea deconstructs the traditional one cap fit all approach to teaching art in the conventional classroom, rather than maximizing the several collaborative approaches that visual art engagement affords students (Tomljenović & Novaković, 2017). Some of the

possible worries of students about returning to school after the COVID-19 lockdown are contacting virus, fear of being isolated and other health-based concerns regarding reintegrating in the school. Collaborative teaching can restore students' confidence and give a sense of reassurance about returning to school. With art collaboration therefore, students are more likely to engage constructively with one another, interact with the classroom environment as well as the procedure which has become collaborative. The practice of collaborative teaching offers such common ground, for both the generalist classroom teachers and art specialist to implement arts integration projects.

## 2. Arts integration

The concept of arts integration can be categorized into three main strata, each of which resonates the therapeutic value of artistic process. These include "Arts integration as learning through and with the arts; arts integration as a curricular connections process; and arts integration as collaborative engagement" earlier discussed. According to Rabkin and Redmond (2004), the term arts integration as "Learning Through and with the Arts" is said to be common to discipline-based approach in which emphasis is often placed on knowledge transfer from art to other subject areas. In other words, such collaboration will encourage engagement in cross-disciplinary connections. Catterall's (2005) idea of "conversation and silence" also gives a clue to the idea of knowledge transfer from art to other disciplines. Catterall explains both external and internal conversations that occur upon experiencing an art form as it ignites neurological processing and as such, behavioural changes.

On the other hand, arts integration as a curricular connection process is described as a more unified and complex approach to curriculum design. Two major approaches exist that define arts integration in this regard. While some hold the notion of parallel processes, others believe in parallel content, as the framework for arts integration as curriculum connection process. The parallel process approach to arts integration advocates for the use of artistic engagement process as tools for learning and engaging students in classroom (Burnaford, Aprill & Weiss, 2001). The parallel content approach sees art as a means of curricular connection across content fields. That is, making use of art to bridge the major issues of the curriculum (Burnaford, Aprill, & Weiss, 2001; Ingram & Seashore, 2003; Kelner & Flynn, 2006). The practice of arts integration as curricular connection often stresses the use of vocabulary and language of the art form when making curricular connections (Weiss & Lichtenstein in press). Scholars in this category based their belief on the findings that "common language is a partial litmus test for ensuring cognitive development and conceptual understanding of the art form" (Krug & Cohen-Evron, 2000).

Arts Integration as collaborative engagement is an approach to arts integration that sees art classroom as a common ground for different learning preference and behaviour. In practice, collaborative engagement entails participants working together with a motive to solve a common problem. Art collaboration is therefore likened to an interjection pattern of weaving process in which horizontal strands (warp) cut through the vertical strings (weft) as integral parts of a woven whole. The arts are an integral part of the curriculum

and are valuable in all aspects of teaching and learning (Brown, 2007). From the foregoing, art not only serves as a viable pedagogical tool for other elements of the curriculum, but also as a curricular collaborative strategy increasing students' enthusiasm for schooling. One major support the schools can give to children whose school rejection is informed by fear and anxiety is to use the art integration curricular strategy, such that accommodate artistic process in all anxiety-provoking subjects such as mathematics, basic science, among others.

### **3. Periodic training in artistic engagement for generalist teachers**

Apart from its consistency with the effective implementation of art-based learning, and a possible solution to the problem of unskilled art teachers and low-quality art teaching earlier enumerated, periodic training in different artistic forms for generalist-teachers can be workable approach to students' school avoidance. It has been discovered that some of the common worries of children about returning to school after a long break like COVID-19 school closure is who will be my new teacher? What if my new teacher is mean? Or will any of my friends still be in my class? (Nightingale, 2020). Teacher-students relationship becomes necessarily reinforced in this regard, and artistic engagement becomes a major tool to facilitate such teacher-pupil relationship.

One of the major problems with generalist teachers who are assigned to teach art in primary schools is inability to design simple and appealing instructional materials to facilitate their teaching processes. This is because they, most times, lack basic artistic skill. This simple task becomes a burden and its many advantages get lost. The implication is boring theoretical and abstract presentation of learning experiences, which does more damage than good. To forestall this, school management can collaborate with art practitioners to facilitate periodic art training for all teachers. An example of such is the 2015 Art Teachers Conference and Workshop organized by GreenHouse Art Gallery Olambe, Lagos. The workshop converged quite a sizeable number of art teachers for one week art training in different art forms. Discussions centered on frustrations and challenges of art teaching at basic educational levels and the way forward. The workshop attracted seasoned art teachers and practitioners from the University of Lagos and other institutions in Lagos. After the workshop, an oral interview with many of the participants revealed expression of joy and gratitude to the conveners, with expectations that such gathering would likewise become a norm at basic level of education. Unfortunately that was the last time such a workshop would hold at that level. The workshop was also concluded with an exhibition of different art works produced by art teachers many of whom had not touched art materials since they left art schools, even though they teach art year in year out. It is believed that if such gesture could be revived and extended to generalist teachers, particularly at the lower basic level, there is a chance of reconstructing Art-Based Learning for children's increased attention span, classroom participation, and in corollary, school attraction in the post COVID-19 world.

## Conclusion

The possibility that the school system will emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic depends hugely on how well the society is able to reconstruct the curricular structure to optimize learning. This is one responsibility COVID-19 pandemic has saddled humanity with, and all resources and approaches must be explored. Art-based learning offers such intellectual re-imagination of the pedagogical possibilities embedded in the arts and ways of harnessing its several models to proffer solutions to some of the post COVID-19 educational complexities. Although, school adjustment problem is not a recent phenomenon, there is no gainsaying that COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened its impact on not only the youngsters but also the school system.

This paper has discussed three major art-based learning models that can be woven into the cultural and creative art curriculum for mitigating students' school avoidance habit. Collaboration between generalist teachers and specialist art teachers is capable of fortifying the shallow and fragile CCA curriculum for realizing its lofty objectives. When art becomes a cross disciplinary tool facilitating learning experience, students who find school boring and unworthy of attention will become reoriented. The same goes for art integration; rather than allowing subjects to provoke anxiety and as a result demotivate students, artistic interpretation of science curriculum will make much sense to students who express preference for concretized, rather than theorized learning experiences. Finally, periodic training of teachers in basic artistic skills will go a long way to complement their pedagogic skills and subject-content knowledge. If CCA will develop readiness in the post COVID-19, learners' reconstruction is a necessity.

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