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## "Content without context is noise": Looking for curriculum harmony in primary arts education in Western Australia

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## “Content without Context is Noise” : Looking for Curriculum Harmony in Primary Arts Education in Western Australia

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### Abstract

Arts education in Western Australian primary schools consist of learning opportunities outlined by mandated curriculum. However, assumptions underlying this curriculum involving access, resources and support impact schools’ capacity to implement the curriculum without them being adequately addressed by the written curriculum. Drawing on the policy enactment theory of Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012), four contextual variables (situated contexts, professional cultures, material contexts and external factors) are used to highlight the differences between the

written published curriculum and the implemented, practised curriculum. Drawing on interviews with 24 participants across four schools issues of geographic location, use of arts specialists, appropriate learning spaces and the stresses associated with mandated literacy and numeracy testing are reported as contextual pressures by this study. This paper details the disruptive interference of these contextual pressures that we describe as ‘noise’. The provision of a better understanding of this contextual landscape brings schools and teachers away from the ‘noise’ of disruption and closer to curriculum harmony.

### Introduction

“*Content without Context is Noise*” as a phrase, has a resonance to the central theme of this paper. For example, it is one thing to write and publish an arts curriculum – that is content. However, it is another to implement this or any curriculum without taking account of the context in which it is to be implemented. Where there is a dissonance between the content and the context, ‘noise’ that is unproductive in terms of curriculum as practiced, is an outcome.

‘*Content*’ in the context of this paper refers to the Western Australian arts curriculum, consisting of five arts subjects: dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2015b). As overarching conceptual organisers students engage with these subjects through the process of *making* and *responding*. This engagement becomes more pressing when from 2018, it is mandated that Western Australian primary schools offer a performing art and a visual art each year to all students. How this is to be programmed in schools is not yet known, and yet in order for effective learning to occur there must be alignment or harmony between curriculum as written and curriculum as practiced (Moore, 2000).

Following on from ‘*content*’, ‘*context*’ describes the school and teaching environment in which content is delivered. These contextual variables impact on teachers’ ability to engage with the arts, but are not necessarily within the control of the individual teacher. This paper concentrates on contextual aspects such as the physical and emotional space of a school, for example, how the administration shows support for the arts and the feelings that this engenders in teachers. This contextual understanding is important for teachers as there is often a mismatch in the way context is accounted for in the written curriculum, and how the reality of environment and place impacts on what learning opportunities teachers can and cannot realistically offer.

The metaphor of ‘noise’ in the system is also useful as a descriptor in the sense that noise are sounds that are especially loud, unpleasant or cause disturbance to harmony. More specifically, ‘*noise*’ in this article refers to a disconnection between individual teachers and

the arts curriculum that exists when *content* is implemented without an understanding of *context*. The lack of harmony between each of these central elements is found in the minimal evidence of arts curriculum in lesson planning, and the lack of engagement by teachers with implementation processes. Consequently, this paper focuses on understanding the *noise*, and increasing opportunities of curriculum harmony to improve effective arts learning.

The article is divided into three sections. The first outlines key curriculum theory considerations, curriculum assumptions, and four contextual dimensions underpinning the research. This section provides a framework for situating this inquiry and assumptions implicit in the *Western Australian Curriculum: Pre-primary to Year 10 Arts Syllabus* (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014a). This framework highlights how these curriculum assumptions impact on schools differently. This is important because the four contextual variables embedded in Ball et al's (2012) policy enactment theory helps identify the background factors that impact on teachers and their ability to deliver quality arts education. Understanding the impact of these variables on schools and teachers provides insight into *what* teachers offer in an arts curriculum and *why*.

Section two of the paper explores key curriculum assumptions and four contextual dimensions as they emerged in the research more specifically. Drawing on four primary schools, twenty teachers and four principals across the greater metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia, we consider how these contextual dimensions are addressed in the curriculum as 'written' and subsequently impact on 'practice' in schools. We draw on evidence offered by these teachers and principals as a way of informing the research, and giving clarity to the question: How and in what ways are the Arts understood, interpreted and enacted by classroom primary teachers in Western Australian schools? What this second section does is make clear the grounded nature of arts education practice in Western Australian primary schools.

The final section discusses the significance of the relationship between content, context and practice and how, when these iterative relationships are neglected, an impoverished arts education in schools results. We argue, for example, that without an understanding of context, curriculum has little meaning for schools, teachers and ultimately students. In linking concepts of *content*, *context* and *noise* we conclude by offering ways of moving towards curriculum harmony that we argue as being critical in improving students' arts learning. So, just as the title of this paper begins with "*Content*" we begin by examining the field of curriculum theory for relevant ideas of 'curriculum as content', and then examine the arts curriculum in Western Australia (our content) for its' inherent assumptions about schools.

### **Understanding Curriculum as 'Content'**

Understanding the difference between 'curriculum as written' and 'curriculum as enacted'

through the work of curriculum theory allows us to comprehend some of the challenges teachers face. Curriculum theory as described by Pinar (2004) is the “interdisciplinary study of educational experience” (p. 2), and looks at defining and characterising curriculum in terms of experience. Following this, we have categorised curriculum in two ways; written and enacted. In this case, the written curriculum is presented to teachers for use in a formal documented sense, and the enacted curriculum is what teachers actually do to provide for learning opportunities in their classrooms. These two characterisations of curriculum provide two key ways to understand the conditions that impact teachers. Likewise, curriculum contemplated in this way may also be considered a “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2011). What this means is that the interplay between the written and enacted experiences of each educational setting is like holding a conversation, in the same way that giving and receiving information influences the next interaction. Therefore, in this way we are acknowledging the relationship between the two, and recognising that each educational site contains its own ‘conversation’. However, *understanding* the relationship between written and enacted curriculum is further ‘complicated’ when the contextual differences between schools are also considered, hence our focus on aspects of policy enactment theory over curriculum theory. However, to better understanding the intersections between the written and enacted curriculum, the written curriculum and the assumptions made about and for schools are examined.

### ***Curriculum and Assumptions in Western Australian Schools***

To be fully implemented in 2018, the *Western Australian Curriculum: Pre-primary to Year 10 Arts Syllabus*, engages students through the twin ideas of *making* and *responding* (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2015b). At its most fundamental, students create and learn arts skills in dance, drama, media arts, music or visual arts through the process of *making* by planning, producing, designing and performing. Students *respond* to their own and others art works through analysing, interpreting and evaluating. Students learn to be artists and audiences for the arts, thereby increasing their engagement with, capacity for, and ability to learn through, with and about the arts.

This new curriculum design, with its two key organisers, has evolved from a policy of ‘adopt and adapt’ (Chapman, Wright, & Pascoe, 2016) from the *Australian Curriculum: The Arts* (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014). Adopting and adapting the national curriculum was deemed necessary by the Western Australian Government (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014b) as a way of improving the relationship (the gap) between teachers and the curriculum they are responsible for implementing (Chapman et al., 2016). This adaptation centred on simplifying the national curriculum and providing year-by-year descriptions, rather than the two-year bands prescribed in the Australian Curriculum. One reason for this simplification of the new *Western Australian*

*Curriculum: Pre-primary to Year 10 Arts Syllabus* in both idea and form, is the notion that more classroom teachers will engage with a simplified document providing explicit teaching ideas, rather than pedagogical ideals as was the case with the previous Western Australian based curriculum (Chapman et al., 2016). Whatever the reason, and however simple the new curriculum is, assumptions are made in this current document about school environment. These environmental assumptions impact on schools in a variety of ways, and are key to understanding the paucity of effective arts education opportunities provided to students. Addressing these assumptions and reconciling them with the reality of school life is fundamental to improving effective arts curricula, and it is to these we now turn.

### ***Curriculum Assumptions***

Implicit in the *Western Australian Curriculum: Pre-primary to Year 10 Arts Syllabus* (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2014a) are assumptions about the nature of schools involving geography, resources, and support. The first key assumption within this document, is that geography should not impact curriculum delivery, and that access to arts opportunities are straightforward. The curriculum is written with the idea that no matter where you are in Western Australia, each student has equitable access to arts learning opportunities. However, in Western Australia, a state of 2.6 million km<sup>2</sup>, primary schools vary from small remote sites with only 25 students to large metropolitan schools with over 1000 students. Remote schools can be hundreds of kilometres from regional centres and several thousand kilometres from Perth as the capital city. The provision of education to these vastly different contexts requires flexible curriculum that can be shaped through teacher agency to fit the environment, students and community that is faced. While the *Western Australian Curriculum: Pre-primary to Year 10 Arts Syllabus* does suggest flexibility, the reality for schools is that opportunity, whether it be for **access** or **provision**, is not equal either in scope or delivery. It is also the case that even the schools in this study, within a 150km radius of each other and the capital city, still face a range of challenges around provision and opportunity highlighting the importance of context itself.

The second key assumption considered is resourcing. Issues of resourcing, like staffing and teaching material supplies, are commonly cited as barriers to curriculum delivery (Russell-Bowie, 2011; Temmerman, 2006). The mandating of both a performing and visual subject by the *Western Australian Curriculum: Pre-primary to Year 10 Arts Syllabus* has added pressure to schools to fulfil this requirement. While it is recognised that these learning opportunities significantly benefit students, and is the first such initiative to be imposed on schools in the Arts learning area, it is a difficult expectation as schools continue to struggle with staffing and resourcing – both physical in terms of classroom design, and material in terms of teaching aids and supplies.

The third key assumption of the arts curriculum to be considered is that of leadership support. Support, in the context of this investigation relates to priorities and time. For example, the written curriculum assumes that as one of the mandated learning areas the Arts will be given the professional learning time and effort required to implement and make the changes necessary to support teachers in this area. However, schools are continually dealing with a crowded curriculum (Sabol, 2013), and the impost of standardised testing in literacy and numeracy (Ewing, 2012). Here a crowded curriculum refers to the competing priorities experienced in a school, and the number of learning areas and/or curriculum ideas that teachers are expected to cover in a year (Crump, 2005). This congestion makes arts learning difficult, with little time to explore, trial, reflect, adjust and improve. Consequently, all participants spoke of the pressure of a congested day, the standardised testing regime, and thus, how the Arts fit into this 'hierarchy of value'.

Taken together, these three key assumptions of geography, resources and support help us understand the discord experienced in primary schools however, these assumptions cannot be examined in isolation. More specifically, the contextual landscape of each school changes the way assumptions impact on arts education practice. In order to understand schools and their individual contexts more fully, we turn to elements of policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012) as one way of examining the mismatch between curriculum as *written* and curriculum as *enacted*.

### ***A Framework for Context***

Ball's et al. (2012) policy enactment theory framework provides a useful heuristic device for exploring context by focussing on the situational, professional, material and external contexts that impact on the daily work of a teacher in implementing arts curriculum. This framework, as a way of thinking about commitments and values that impact on implementation (or enactment) of policy, grew out of work in secondary schools in England. Finding the diversity and contested nature of enactment across schools and classrooms adds to the complexity of each school situation, and relates to the work of this study in understanding context. Here our work focuses on curriculum implementation and teacher practice in the primary setting (aged 5 – 12), but there are parallels between policy enactment and curriculum enactment in that both require the implementation of an externally produced document in the educational setting. The iterative nature of these factors provides a flexible lens in which to view context as one key variable in this complex dynamic. Each of these are now considered in turn.

### ***Four Contextual Dimensions***

The first dimension of four proposed by Ball et al. (2012), 'situated contexts' (location,



population), reveals the impact of *place* on a teachers' ability to offer the type of arts program that best suits the school and its students. Place, as a site or location for example, impacts on issues of access. How access is recognised and accommodated by schools provides the contrast between the written curriculum and the curriculum as practiced. This is important because access to live theatre and dance for example, provides opportunity for arts learning and lack of access means that these opportunities can be expensive and remote.

The second dimension, 'professional cultures', identifies the processes within a school that impact on arts curriculum implementation and delivery. Key to understanding professional cultures is the relationship between staff and the administration of the school. School administration decision-making processes and the value attached to learning area priorities, determines in part the ongoing support for the arts (by the school administration). Understanding how and why schools prioritise learning and show support for the arts increases opportunities for the provision of quality arts learning for students.

As the third dimension, 'material contexts' identifies the human and physical resources such as staffing, infrastructure, and provision available to schools. For example, focusing on, using or adding to the staffing expertise of a school is imperative to a well-functioning and efficient school that can deliver the mandated curriculum effectively. In a related way, the infrastructure of a school - the layout and use of classroom space, impacts on the connectedness staff and students have with their school. These areas are particularly relevant to teachers in schools as they represent the components that impact daily on their teaching and hence the arts learning opportunities they provide.

Finally, as the fourth dimension, 'external contexts' identifies the wider issues that impact on schools and are characterised as external pressures or expectations (Ball et al., 2012), including, for example, standardised testing and a crowded curriculum (Sabol, 2013). Outside the control of teachers and even individual schools, these pressures and expectations are often experienced as system initiatives and requirements. Subsequently, teachers feel that flexibility and choice has been removed from their teaching practice, stifling their own agency and student learning opportunities.

Therefore, unpacking the four contextual dimensions of the framework provides an important tool in analysing arts practice in primary schools in Western Australia and helps in examining why classroom teachers struggle to implement the curriculum as written. To better understand this discord and explore context in practice, four schools representing three education jurisdictions in the greater metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia provide an insight into how context impacts practice. More specifically, contextual differences are highlighted by considering the perspectives of both specialist arts teachers and generalist classroom

teachers. The inclusion of these two groups of teachers is intended to highlight how the mismatch or disharmony in arts implementation occurs in each school and across differing levels of arts experience. Each research site is now further considered.

### ***Jurisdictions, Schools and Participants***

The three educational systems in Western Australia; Government, Catholic and Independent were represented in this study by the four schools involved. Paradigmatic sampling method (Palys, 2008) was employed as this method provides exemplars of a particular ‘class’. In this case ‘educational jurisdiction’ equates to ‘class’ in that each sector provides a bounded context (school) for consideration. In this way, each jurisdiction is represented; two government primary schools, and one each from the Catholic and independent sectors. All four schools offer an arts program with specialist arts teachers although the art forms offered vary across the schools. Music is offered in some form in all four schools with a specialist arts teacher, and all other arts subjects are offered but not necessarily with a specialist arts teacher.

From these four schools, twenty teachers and the four school principals took part in semi-structured interviews that considered contextual factors impacting on arts practices in the classroom<sup>1</sup>. An interview schedule was used with all participants that covered multiple aspects of the four contextual dimensions. More specifically, questions under the ‘Situating Context’ heading invited impressions from the participants of the school cohort, physical location of the school, and arts background of students. Similarly, open-ended questions under the ‘Material Context’ heading such as “In your opinion, what impact does the physical layout of a school have on your ability to offer arts activities?” were asked, and responses reflected a range of diverse experience and backgrounds.

Each interview was transcribed and coded using a structural coding method that was “framed and driven by the research question and topic” (Saldana, 2013). Unsurprisingly, teachers with more experience had more to say about their classroom practice and school procedures than those with only one or two years of teaching experience. As an adjunct, the principals were asked to consider how the contextual factors impacted their role as school leader with responsibility for curriculum leadership in each school. Contrasting these environments, the following discussion outlines how the written curriculum makes assumptions about contexts and what the everyday reality of context means for each of the participant schools.

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<sup>1</sup> This research was approved by the affiliated university and the anonymity of the participants and schools is protected using pseudonyms.

## Contextual Understandings

This second section looks more specifically at four contextual dimensions (situated, professional, material and external) and their impact on the everyday reality of school life for the participant teachers, highlighting the salient elements each participant reported.

### *Situated Contexts*

Situated contexts describe how schools are different by reflecting the environment that they are in (Ball et al., 2012). In relation to the study, situated contexts reveal a consideration of the impact of *place* on a teachers' ability to offer the type of arts program that best suits the individual school and its students. Participants were asked their impression of their schools in terms of location and school population and what impact those areas had on their ability to enact the arts curriculum.

### *The Impact of Access*

Place, in the context of arts learning, impacts on learning through the notion of 'access'. Access is important because often the physical location of the school means external opportunities are difficult to access, either in terms of travelling to arts events, or for external providers to travel to a school. For example, the *Western Australian Curriculum: Pre-primary to Year 10 Arts Syllabus* makes suggestions for minimising the impact of location through the use of both live and digital versions of art works (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2015a). The reference to digital versions of artworks is an attempt to help schools recognise that there are alternative ways of accessing the work of others when attending in person is not a valid option. Each of the four schools dealt with the issue of place in different ways. For example, two of the participating schools are located close to public transport and in a locality where the hiring of buses is an easy option. Admiral Hall is one of these schools.

Admiral Hall is an independent inner-city school located in a port precinct. A small school with only 86 enrolled students, the school population is diverse but prides itself on significant community involvement. For example, the school has a strong link with a nearby theatre company, and the school often enters community-based activities that involves students in the local area. The Arts at Admiral Hall comprise of visual arts for Years 3 to 6, and music for the Kindergarten to Year 2 students. Being an urban school, the students have easy access to arts activities within the city precinct, and make use of such activities frequently. This easy access is highlighted by one of the classroom teachers, Maya:

We've got [Theatre Company] around the corner – they often offer us free sessions. We've had parades down the street – we can just go and access. We took part in the children's festival last weekend. So, in terms of being able to access arts within the

city we're really lucky. We have our own bus so we've been to [a school] for a performance once. One time we got offers to the ballet.

(Maya, classroom teacher, Admiral Hall)

In contrast, Winding Crescent Primary School in an outer metropolitan setting, finds it difficult to bus the children to arts performances or exhibitions. In this school, excursions are perceived as expensive and often outside the budget of school families. The issue of access though, can be perceived in different ways as highlighted by Paul, the Acting Principal at Winding Crescent:

I don't think the kind of distance we have from the CBD or from [the port] and things like that has a big impact. It has an impact in terms of if we're visiting places and incursions. We have kids here who haven't been to the beach, who don't get to the CBD, don't know where it is and things like that. So, when we go there it's exciting. So, I guess there's an impact in terms of excursions and things like that but not in terms of access.

(Paul, Acting Principal, Winding Crescent)

What Paul highlights is a perception of access to opportunities being equal, but without the ability to get the students to performances and events. This perception of equity and equality of opportunity becomes clearer when the background of Winding Crescent is examined in more detail.

As a school in an outer metropolitan suburb, Winding Crescent experiences families struggling to provide necessities for their children. Winding Crescent caters for just over 400 students from Kindergarten to Year 6. There is a 25% indigenous population (Aboriginal Australians), and over 25 nationalities represented at the school. Identified as having a lower than average Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score, where the index measures educational advantage or disadvantage, the school works closely with the school community to improve the conditions and situation of the students. Parental involvement is encouraged and initiatives such as a breakfast program give students a healthy start to the school day.

Winding Crescent offers arts in the form of music / drama (a performing arts hybrid model) and for Years 1 - 3, visual arts. Both arts subjects are taught by specialist arts teachers, however as both arts teachers are part time, the younger classes have visual arts where it fits into the timetable (contingent on the availability of staff and space), therefore not all classes have access to the arts with a specialist teacher for the entire year. This means that while students experience many arts opportunities, these are mainly limited to what can be accessed

on the school site. By way of contrast, at Admiral Hall, the use of external arts opportunities is an integral part of the arts program for the school.

Perceptions around opportunity are also created through leadership support, and as a learning area support from the school administration team is crucial for the Arts. In terms of the contextual dimensions being examined in this paper, support from the school administration falls within the domain of professional cultures, and is considered next.

### *Professional Cultures*

Professional cultures identify the processes within a school that impact on arts curriculum implementation and delivery. The written curriculum asks and assumes schools will be able to specifically offer at least one performing subject and a visual subject, from pre-primary to Year 8 in all schools (School Curriculum and Standards Authority, 2015b). For example, a school might choose to offer dance as their performing art and media arts as their visual arts subject. However, this school-based decision and the priority it is given is predicated on staffing and resourcing support being available. Key to providing support for the arts, in relation to staffing and resources, are those who make planning decisions – the school administration team. Therefore, the relationship between staff and the administration of the school is critical. This relationship was examined in the four participant schools by first looking at the priority given to arts learning, and second, supportive school administration decision-making processes. Specific questions considered by the participants included in what ways does the school organise for learning opportunities in each of the Arts subjects and what involvement does the administration have in the process?

### *The Impact of School Priorities*

School priorities relate to those decisions made at a school level that determine what attention and support is given. In Western Australia schools are required to develop a business plan with stated priorities to develop policy and budget. Across all four schools, it was acknowledged that the arts were 'important', but none had the Arts as a documented school priority. This lack of inclusion is a manifestation of value, and the hierarchy that exists in education reflecting the pressures of prioritising literacy and numeracy curriculum.

St Albertine's, a small Catholic primary school is a case in point. St Albertine's is in a regional area approximately 100km south east of the capital city, Perth. Catering for 180 students from Kindergarten to Year 6, St Albertine's sits in a lower socio-economic area within a semi-rural farming region with 80% of the population Australian born. Adhering to the principles of a Catholic education, the school motto is "Faith and Trust". Increasing the literacy and numeracy standards of the students is a high priority for the school. Penny, the arts specialist at the school, described it this way:

I'm pretty upfront about that. And I have said that people want the arts but in terms of when you look at our vision of the school, it's all about reading, writing, religion. Which I get. (Penny, arts specialist, St Albertine's)

So, the tension between offering an art program is tempered by the priority placed on improving literacy and numeracy. This tension is further highlighted by one of the classroom teachers at St Albertine's.

I wouldn't say [the Arts] was a number one priority. And I think that's why we're not reporting on art is because it was kind of well do we need to? It's up to you if you want to teach it or not.

(Felicity, classroom teacher, St Albertine's)

What Felicity highlights is that SCSA's mandate for schools to offer two arts subjects is yet to make an impact at the school level. However, a challenge will come if the mandated provision and reporting of a performing art subject and visual subject is upheld. In addition, School Curriculum and Standards Authority (2016) has released a notional time allocation guideline for each learning area in which the Arts is allocated two hours per week. This guideline recognises school based decision-making, so how schools will organise for this is yet to be seen, as many primary schools are not currently timetabling for two hours per week of arts instruction. This placement of the arts highlights a long standing struggle with marginalisation, the ramifications of which has been discussed by other authors in previous issues of this journal (Collins, 2016; Webb, 2016).

#### *The Impact of Administration Support*

A supportive school administration is crucial to an effective arts program, and at all four research sites, the principal, as the head of the administration team, was supportive of the arts. At Hilldale PS, where the principal has a drama background, support for the arts was high. Hilldale Primary School is located 12km south of the Perth CBD. As such it is close to large shopping centres, recreation facilities and public transport. Over 70% of Hilldale's population was born in Australia, and over 80% of those living in the suburb speak only English. Hilldale Primary School is an independent government school, meaning the Principal and School Board "have been given increased flexibility and responsibility to make local decisions across a range of school operations to enhance education outcomes for students" (Department of Education, 2016). Hilldale currently caters for over 650 students from Kindergarten to Year 6.

The school focuses on academic achievement and striving of excellence in all students as indicated by their school motto "we are judged by what we do". The arts are an important

focus for the school, and music and drama are offered as part of the designated arts program taught by specialist teachers. The music teacher is full-time, teaching across the entire school, and the drama teacher works part-time with the Year 3 to Year 6 students. The classroom teachers have individual responsibility for visual arts, and there is an outside provider for 10 weeks of dance for all students each year. There is an increasing focus on media arts in the school as interested staff are employed and run innovative programs in their classrooms. The Principal at Hilldale described her support for the Arts in the following way:

To me it is almost like the arts is the umbrella that we can scoop them all up [the students] and give them the opportunity to shine.

(Melanie, Principal, Hilldale PS)

What Melanie, as Principal describes, is a supportive attitude towards the arts that reflects how the arts cater for the diversity of student experience. Recognising and supporting this diversity is achieved across the five arts subjects (dance, drama, media arts, music and visual arts) at Hilldale.

Support from the administration was a theme that staff from the other three schools also highlighted. For example, Ruth, a classroom teacher at Winding Crescent PS, underlined the supportive nature of their administration for the arts in the following way.

I think one thing that we're really lucky with here is that we've got leadership that appreciate the arts. So, we've been allowed and given permission to get, sink our teeth into some really big projects...

(Ruth, classroom teacher, Winding Crescent)

At the time of the interviews Ruth was in the middle of working on a large school mural with her class, and although she was spending much of her DOTT<sup>2</sup> (duties other than teaching time) on the project. Completing the mural with her students was valued by the administration and Ruth appreciated the support given to her to start and complete the task. In this research site support from administration, and therefore value, was translated into time.

In summary, understanding the professional cultures of the school led to an exploration of school priorities and support from the school leadership group. After the consideration of the first two contextual dimensions (situation and professional cultures), the teacher participants

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<sup>2</sup> DOTT is time allocated for teachers to perform duties other than face to face teaching within the normal school day.

are seen to be working under a variety of circumstances, away from the ideals of the written arts curriculum. The third dimension, material contexts, sheds further light on the complexity of schools as material contexts deal with understanding the impact that the human and physical resources available to teachers have on the provision of learning opportunities for students.

### ***Material Contexts***

Material contexts are those identified as the human and physical resources available to schools (Ball et al., 2012). These resources are particularly relevant to teachers as they represent the components that have a daily impact on their teaching. Infrastructure, staffing, and provision are three key concepts considered in relation to written curriculum assumptions, juxtaposed against the realities of teacher engagement with the arts. The written curriculum, through the mandated requirement of a performing and visual arts subject being taught each year, assumes that schools have the necessary physical space and resources to manage both components of the Arts curriculum. However, this is not always the case, and the reliance on the 'ideal scenario' assumption of the *Western Australian Curriculum: Pre-primary to Year 10 Arts Syllabus* has placed additional stress on an already marginalised learning area. Participants were asked to consider these ideas through questions that focused on how the physical layout of the school impacted their ability to offer arts activities and what role the staffing profile of the school played in their ability (or necessity) to teach the arts?

### ***The Impact of Infrastructure***

Primary schools in Western Australia are built on a ratio of classrooms to expected student numbers, but sometimes the student intake quickly outstrips the physical infrastructure of a school, leading to pressure on resources both physical and material. At Hilldale PS, the arts have a high profile, but pressure of student numbers mean that the purpose-built visual art room is used as a regular classroom and the drama teacher is employed without a regular space to teach in. This has ramifications not only for the staff, but also for the students as highlighted by Rose, the drama teacher at Hilldale.

There is no home for [drama], so I found that really difficult to adjust to. Not too much in the fact that you couldn't do what you wanted but resource wise and space wise that the kids could identify that this space was for this purpose.

(Rose, arts specialist, Hilldale)

The concept of the arts and especially the performing arts (dance, drama and music) having a 'home' was also identified by curriculum leaders as being important for schools to consider (Chapman et al., 2016). For example, it was suggested that the recognition of a regular space adequate for the task, provides a sense of belonging and a place to safely experiment with arts



ideas within the confines of a known group i.e. the classroom cohort. Undercover areas and other open spaces while adequate, do not provide the same feeling of belonging or safety, and often are booked for other purposes leaving the performing arts class to find an alternative space, if any.

The performing arts are not the only art forms impacted by school infrastructure. For example, the physical layout impacts on classroom teachers wanting to experiment with visual arts in their classrooms with carpet on the floors making the use of different mediums (such as paint, clay, and ink) problematic. Felicity, a classroom teacher at St Albertine's, exemplifies the issue in the following way.

No, we don't have enough space, I avoid paint pretty much altogether because I have carpet...because I know the cleaners will just kill me, so we try to do things where they're sitting at their desks.

(Felicity, classroom teacher, St Albertine's)

Teachers are part of a team, including non-teaching staff, and so being mindful of the workload of the support staff means teaching programs are often devised with minimal clean-up needed to maintain a cohesive staff. A cohesive staff is also built on the premise that the staffing profile supports the curriculum and the students.

### *The Impact of Staffing*

The ability of a school to effectively manage the two arts subjects expected each year depends in part on how the school is staffed. Having or finding an arts specialist teacher increases a schools' capacity to cope with curriculum change in the Arts as it provides the school specialist skills and knowledge to draw upon. In Western Australia, many arts specialists are either music or visual arts specialists. Some of these specialists have university teaching degrees in these specialisations, but are becoming less common due to changes in university degree structures. Increasingly, for example, there are fewer pre-service programs that offer an arts speciality as a pathway for a major or minor teaching area, and as a result there are fewer trained specialists in schools (Collins, 2016; Lummis, Morris, & Paolino, 2014). Others are classroom teachers who have an interest in the arts, and so become the arts 'specialist' for their school. Gina, from St Albertine's highlights what generally happens when their school hires staff.

At a bigger school you would probably go "right, we need a drama teacher" and then they would employ that person for that role. Whereas here, you need a classroom teacher, but you're interested in that [the Arts] so right you're doing that now...

(Gina, classroom teacher, St Albertine's)

Components of the arts covered by specialist arts teachers in schools can also vary. Where there is an arts specialist teacher, there can be a decreased expectation for classroom teachers to 'cover' that art form. However, without an arts teacher, the classroom teachers find themselves filling the gap, predominately without expertise in the area. With two art forms to cover this scenario will only increase, putting increased pressure on the ability of the classroom teacher to manage the arts curriculum.

Similarly, as the 'Duties other than Teaching' (DOTT) provider, the arts teacher often provides time for regular classroom teachers to be away from their class. This provision of preparation time for classroom teachers, when the students have their specialist classes, is an increasingly common scenario in primary schools. Monique, a classroom teacher at Winding Crescent talks about the role of the arts specialist and DOTT provision.

I think specialist teachers are really important and I know, especially [visual] art teachers and music teachers, that we need them but we seem to be – they're hard to find at the moment so you kind of just have regular teachers slotting and trying to find out if they can do it themselves to provided DOTT.

(Monique, classroom teacher, Winding Crescent)

At Admiral Hall, where there has been a long history of arts engagement in the school, the staffing focus for the Arts is slightly different, as Natalie, the Principal points out.

The thing about the arts jobs is it's really hard because it's so part-time, maybe one day a week, which is really hard to attract people to that job.

(Natalie, Principal, Admiral Hall)

So, the difficulty for schools, especially smaller schools, is attracting qualified arts teachers into what are often part-time positions. Finding the right person who is willing or only wants to work one or perhaps two days a week is an additional challenge for school administrations; this being the case in an economy where there is chronic underemployment (Heath, 2016). This contextual complexity impacts on classroom teachers as it adds to their overall workload, that is, being responsible for all the learning areas not covered by specialist teachers. In the same way that staffing is an important determinant of effective arts education, so too is provision.

### *The Impact of Provision*

As the third element of material contexts, provision identifies the material resources that a teacher uses to offer arts activities. For classroom teachers, the biggest concern is money, and

how budget drives activities. Consistently across the four research sites, participants talked about how budget impacted on their arts offerings. Brooke, the arts specialist at Admiral Hall notes:

Oh, I could always have more. I try to be quite conservative with the budget and I just have to think of it within the grand scheme of the school. It's a low fee-paying school, so there's a lower budget.

(Brooke, arts specialist, Admiral Hall)

Consideration of the budget also raised an issue in nominating someone within the school to take ownership of the ordering and checking of supplies. At Hilldale, it was Georgia's responsibility:

If you wanted to do a different activity you have to really think ahead to order the materials as each community has their own budget. But, it's just a difficult process and I think if people are busy it's like "Oh I won't bother with that, I'll just do the basic stuff", and we're all guilty of that.

(Georgia, classroom teacher, Hilldale)

As Georgia points out, the variety of learning tasks a teacher prepares for students over a day, week or term, sometimes mean the easiest path organisationally, and for a teacher's personal sanity, is to keep activities simple. Each of these considerations are important when having to factor in ordering materials as well as setting up and packing away more complicated activities within an allocated teaching time and impacts on the arts learning opportunities offered.

Provision then, impacts on classroom teachers through budgeting and resources and the two concepts are inexplicitly intertwined. Coupled with our growing understanding of the contextual complexity facing teachers when offering arts curriculum, external factors are the final element of Ball et al's (2012) framework considered.

### ***External Contexts***

External contexts identify the wider issues that impact on schools and are characterised as external expectations or pressures (Ball et al., 2012). These issues are often outside the control of teachers and even individual schools. Specific questions asked of the participants targeting these issues included what challenges do you face when implementing new policy or curriculum and what do you need from the school leadership and /or system to make this process of enactment easier? Standardised testing and the crowded nature of the curriculum were the two most commonly named issues facing the participant teachers when grappling

with time for the arts in schools. These two issues are in line with recent studies suggesting similar problems are faced by teachers in primary schools (Alter, Hays, & O'Hara, 2009; Ewing, 2012). These expectations and pressures are considered separately to provide a more nuanced understanding of what is affecting classroom teachers with standardised testing one prime example .

### *The Impact of Expectations*

The National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a nationwide testing program for students in year 3, 5, 7 and 9. The testing covers components of the Australian Curriculum in reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy. All students, regardless of educational jurisdiction, sit the tests over a week in May of each year. Participants at all four schools were quick to cite NAPLAN as having an impact in one way or another from the 'adultification' of children (Bousfield & Ragusa, 2014), having to 'teach to the test' (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013), or the focus on 'increasing student performance' (Hardy, 2014). Maya, a classroom teacher at Admiral Hall attempts to find balance by putting the testing program into perspective:

NAPLAN impacts on everything but as a school we attempt to ensure that it becomes part of a balanced approach. At some points, we've had some parents who place an inordinate emphasis on NAPLAN. Then again, I would say a high proportion of our parents are not that focussed on it. And in fact, some are dead against it but we feel that it's a useful thing to do. We do it. We use the results but they're just part of our deal. (Maya, classroom teacher, Admiral Hall)

In the Catholic sector, there is the added expectation of the *Bishop's Literacy Test*, where students are tested on their knowledge and understanding of Religious Education concepts (taken at Year 3, 5, and 7). Teachers at St Albertine's talked about the expectations of NAPLAN and the *Bishop's Literacy Test* as having an impact on the perceived place of the arts and time requirements for each.

I think preparing the kids for the NAPLAN test takes up a lot of time. And they don't test the arts in NAPLAN, it's all focused on English and mathematics, and then in the Catholic schools they also have the Bishop's Literacy Test as well. So, they're our 3 main focus areas, there's going to be data that's collected about the school reflecting our teaching, which can have a big impact on our own jobs, and the parents are getting the reports back and going "oh well my kid's all the way below here, what have you been doing?"

(Catherine, classroom teacher, St Albertine)

Apart from the standardised testing regimes imposed on schools, other expectations arise from within the school community that require teachers to accommodate change. In the form of incursions or class excursions, these extra activities impact on arts programs and time in arts lessons. Leanne, the arts specialist at Hilldale notes:

If we have groups come in [incursions] or when we've got swimming, sometimes things can't be avoided because you can't change any of that, so if they're going to swimming I'll say to a teacher "if you can change [their music time], change it but I'm not going to run around trying to organise everybody". So, there is those sorts of things. (Leanne, arts specialist, Hilldale)

Consequently, there is an expectation for school staff to be flexible and accommodating. In schools where this culture of goodwill happens with genuine flexibility rather than grudging compliance, there is better communication between staff. At the same time, the pressure of meeting curriculum requirements and parental expectations is immense and examined next.

#### *The Impact of Pressure*

Teachers face many pressures, but none quite like the pressure of a crowded curriculum (Sabol, 2013). Taryn, a classroom teacher at Winding Crescent explains:

It's just the amount that you have to get through in terms of the curriculum, it's so heavy and they're expected to do so much. And you just don't get time. Like I would say maybe one art lesson an hour a week and then its whenever we get time for the mural, and still some kids miss out on that each week so it's not enough really. And incorporating drama into your reading lessons and stuff like that, that can be tricky in terms of planning especially with twenty-five kids. And you know you've got kids that are illiterate; they can't still read at that age. (Taryn, classroom teacher, Winding Crescent)

The 'standard stuff' of literacy and numeracy is a recurring theme repeatedly highlighted by the participants. Unsurprisingly, the pressure for teachers did not come from being unable to fulfil arts curriculum requirements, comments were instead about the pressures of fulfilling literacy and numeracy requirements. These external factors are a constant pressure teachers both feel and respond to.

Taken together, the four contextual dimensions add to an understanding of curriculum assumptions and teacher practice in the arts. Considering the three ideas of *content* (arts curriculum), *context* (school and teaching environment) and *noise* (interruptions) allows us to think more clearly about what each means to practice and how they interrelate. In this final

section, we outline our interpretation of ‘noise’ as a way of describing the mismatch between curriculum as written and curriculum as enacted.

### **Turning Curriculum Noise into Curriculum Harmony**

In the context of this study, ‘noise’ is presented as a conceptual organiser describing the interruption between the flow of written curriculum and its enactment as effective learning opportunities. Part of this disruption is a result of the interplay between contextual variables and curriculum assumptions covered in the previous section. Recognising and acknowledging these concerns is a step towards minimising the impact of curriculum assumptions surrounding access, resourcing and support for schools. The other part of the disruption involves a resistance to curriculum change by teachers, a change ‘fatigue’ which is out of alignment with curriculum assumptions made by the written curriculum. For example, the written curriculum assumes enthusiastic compliance with content and pedagogy contained within the document. Reality suggests though, that teacher compliance with the content and pedagogy is less than enthusiastic (Andrich, 2009).

What we could observe, for example, is the way that teachers are resisting constant curriculum change by disconnecting from the written curriculum, and perhaps in the process, disconnecting from perceptions of top down control from those agencies charged with producing curriculum. This disconnection is demonstrated through a resistance to engage with the implementation process by some teachers. This comment below from a participant teacher with over twenty years teaching experience sums up the attitude towards the new arts curriculum when asked if the timeline for implementation was known:

Most of us go ‘I don’t know, and I don’t really care’. And seriously, I don’t because having taught for so long, it [curriculum] seems to do a 7-year cycle and they change the rules, and they relabel it. I do whatever they say, when they bring it out...and then they’ll change the rules and then they’ll tell us to throw it out and put something else in because they always do.

(Breanna, classroom teacher, Winding Crescent)

The frustration with the change process evident from Breanna is palpable. What this means is that there is an ongoing challenge to reach classroom teachers through the ‘noise’ of change. SCSA’s efforts to make the curriculum more accessible are welcome attempts but the rhetoric of constant change still hampers the work to be done. This idea of ‘change fatigue’ (Andrich, 2009; Dilkes, Cunningham, & Gray, 2014), being tired of seemingly constant adaptation and change, is not new. However, the system’s ability to overcome this fatigue is not yet apparent, identified by comments like that from Breanna.

Adding to the issue of engagement with the arts in schools is the rhetoric of the 'ideal school'. What is seen and given space, time and resources (whether deliberately or not) is what is perceived to have priority in the curriculum. This concept of value has relevance at all levels of education regardless of whether it can be articulated by all involved (Bleazby, 2015). Students perceive it from teachers (time given to learning areas), teachers perceive it from administrators (time given to professional learning), and administrators perceive it from systems and sectors (standardised testing and accountability). The challenge is to recognise and re-evaluate engagement with the arts to better fit school resources and student needs.

### **The Future**

We opened with the phrase '*content without context is noise*' suggesting this is useful in explaining the impact contextual components of access, support and resources have on the written and enacted arts curriculum. Further highlighting this impact is the notion that without consideration of the relationship between context and written curriculum, disruption or 'noise' is the result. The key enablers we identified in working to minimise the disruption include: access to learning opportunities, quality support from school leadership personnel, and development of arts resources both physical and material. Key constraints to overcome and minimise the 'noise' include an overcrowded curriculum, change fatigue experienced by teachers and priority given to standardised testing regimes. Value or lack of value for the Arts as a learning area, is replete in curriculum development, implementation and fatigue, however through awareness from teachers and school leaders, change is possible.

What the research reveals is that schools with a better understanding of content, context and practice for their situation are better placed to deliver effective arts learning opportunities. Where there is less understanding of the relationship between content and context, there is less connection and more disjointed application of arts learning opportunities in the school – or more 'noise'. Curriculum is written with the expectation that through the way that teachers apply it, students in any given educational setting have access to similar learning concepts and outcomes. However, even with similar learning concepts, there is still variation in practice across classrooms, particularly in the Arts. In other words, context is the 'missing link' for enactment to be effective in student learning.

Therefore, the potential for the understandings identified in this article in relation to access, support and resources to influence enactment methods used in schools is consistent. The identification of the individual contextual structure of a school, and working more deliberately within those understandings increases opportunities for successful and effective arts learning opportunities for students. Improved support from systems and sectors in identifying 'where' and 'why' schools might encounter curriculum implementation difficulties would also be benefit students, schools and systems. Educational accord or '*harmony*' then, is reached when

practice, context and content are aligned and resonate with each other in consonant not dissonant ways. Understanding the relationship between content and context, and minimising the *noise* of ineffective implementation practice allows schools and teachers to better align content and take account of the contextual variables at play.

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