

# The Not-So-Expendable Curriculum

BY THAMBI THOMAS





As Seventh-day Adventist educators, we believe in providing a well-rounded education that promotes the development of the whole child. We have designed and fine-tuned a K-12 curriculum for Adventist schools that is the envy of other private religious school systems. We have developed clearly articulated curriculum guides so that elementary and secondary teachers know exactly what they must teach and emphasize in the classroom in order to help students succeed. But unfortunately, some components of a balanced curriculum, especially at the secondary level, have been neglected.

Music and visual arts have rarely been viewed as essential to the curriculum or to the development of the child. In fact, administrators as well as music and visual-arts teachers will testify that the arts have been seen as a frill or as expendable. Years ago, local conferences had a “circuit music teacher” who visited smaller schools to teach choir and/or band. But with budget cuts, this expense was also seen as “expendable”; so today, except at larger elementary schools; music instruction is provided by the regular classroom teacher or a volunteer, and often “integrated” into the instructional program. More often than not, the teacher/volunteer has little background or training in music.

The current preoccupation with exit exams and the need for students to acquire math and English skills has taken its toll on other important areas of the curriculum. S. Paul Reville in a recent issue of *Education World* boldly advocated lengthening the school day so that schools could place a renewed emphasis on the arts, social studies, and foreign languages.<sup>1</sup>

Fine-arts education in Adventist schools, particularly in senior academies, has focused primarily on music. Adventist music teachers have done a commendable job of training students’ musical skills, and the church at large has benefited. The emphasis on music in Adventist education is understandable, since Ellen White had much to say about the importance of music. She wrote that “the melody of praise is the atmosphere of heaven”<sup>2</sup> and that music (sacred songs) would cheer us on our way to heaven, just as sacred songs encouraged and cheered the children of Israel as they wandered through the wilderness.<sup>3</sup> Ellen White viewed music as an effective way of “impressing the heart with

spiritual truth,” since the lyrics of many religious songs conveyed a strong theological message, often echoing passages of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> She wrote that “the ability to sing is a talent of influence, which God desires all to cultivate and use to His name’s glory,”<sup>5</sup> and that the ability to sing is a “gift of God” to His children on earth.<sup>6</sup>

Ellen White recommended that music be emphasized in the education of the child at home as well as in the school, because students would thus be “drawn closer to God, to their teacher, and to one another.”<sup>7</sup> Her emphasis on the importance of music in education is being validated today by physicians and researchers. Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner has identified seven types of intelligences: linguistic, logical/mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal, and has concluded that the arts build upon and integrate the other forms of intelligence.<sup>8</sup> There is compelling evidence that music education at elementary and secondary levels is essential to success in the other school subjects taught at school. For example, Eric Jensen, co-founder of SuperCamp, a leading provider of brain-compatible learning programs, believes that effective arts programs enhance learning because “the systems they nourish, which include our integrated sensory, attentional, cognitive, emotional, and motor capacity processes are in fact, the driving force behind all other learning,” and that the arts enable students to “simultaneously develop and mature multiple brain systems.”<sup>9</sup>

Jensen’s research has identified five neurobiological systems and their respective areas of control that have an impact on student learning.<sup>10</sup> One can easily see in them parallels to Gardner’s multiple intelligences:

- **Cognitive Systems** – Visual/spatial, mathematical, and creative functions;
- **Emotional Systems** – Social and personal skills as well as cultural and aesthetic appreciation;
- **Perceptual-Motor Systems** – Sensory acuity and timing;
- **Stress Response System** – Immune response, autonomic nervous system, sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems; and
- **Memory Systems** – Attention, concentration, and recall.

Jensen concluded that instruction in the arts also impacts non-academic aspects of the student’s development in such areas as self-discipline and motivation, aesthetic awareness, cultural exposure, social harmony, creativity, improved emotional expression, and appreciation of diversity.<sup>11</sup>

In *Critical Links*, a compendium of research pertaining to the importance, relevance, and influence of arts education in

The current preoccupation with exit exams and the need for students to acquire math and English skills has taken its toll on other important areas of the curriculum.

the development of the whole child, the writers make a strong case that an education in the arts assists “in the development of critical academic skills, basic and advanced literacy and numeracy.”<sup>12</sup> The authors identify six specific areas that are influenced by arts education:

- Arts education enhances and complements basic reading, writing, and language skills development.
- Music instruction helps develop spatial reasoning skills, which are important in mathematics.
- A variety of art experiences helps build students’ fundamental thinking skills.
- Student motivation and positive risk-taking are nurtured when they engage in the arts
- Students grow in social behaviors such as self-confidence, self-identity, and ability to collaborate from engaging in the arts.



Fine-arts education in Adventist schools, particularly in senior academies, has focused primarily on music.



cifically for this article by the author, attest to the importance of music in Adventist education, as well the lasting impact and influence of Ellen White on the Adventist Church’s curriculum:

- **Choir** – 107 academies (**98 percent**) – Several academies also offered concert choir, select choir, chorale, etc.;
- **Band** – 87 academies (**80 percent**) – Several of the smaller academies had an instrumental ensemble instead of a band;

- Student engagement in the arts helps to enhance the school learning environment, making it more conducive to learning.

Ellen White wrote extensively about quality education for children and young people. Her most succinct and widely quoted statement is that education “is the *harmonious* development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers.”<sup>13</sup> Note that in this quote, Ellen White uses the term *harmonious*, which usually refers to the arts, especially music.

But while a number of her statements refer to the importance of music in education, she is silent about the visual arts. This may be one of the reasons why music has been the most important, and in many instances the only fine arts program in Adventist schools. The results of a survey of all 109 Adventist academies in the North American Division (NAD), done spe-

- **Bell choir** – 57 academies (**52 percent**); and
- **Private lessons** – 56 academies (**51 percent**) offered a variety of private music lessons which included voice, piano, instrumental, organ, and strings.<sup>14</sup>

Compare the data given above for music with the paucity of courses in the visual arts: Only 40 percent of the academies offered any courses in this area, and even fewer (19 to 20 percent) offered specific semester or year-long courses in drawing, painting, or ceramics. Many NAD academies require only one-half to one unit (one to two semesters) of arts for graduation. To fulfill this requirement, most students take music—in fact, most NAD secondary schools don’t require *any* visual art credits for graduation.

Another growing trend is the emergence of drama in the



Ellen White recommended that music be emphasized in the education of the child at home as well as in the school, because students would thus be “drawn closer to God, to their teacher, and to one another.”

academy curriculum. Forty-seven academies offered drama as a course for academic credit. Many schools doubtless see drama as a means of Christian witness to the community and the school’s constituency.

The trend of focusing on the core curriculum and not requiring visual arts for graduation is also reflected in United States public education today, when only 28 of the 50 states required courses in the arts at the secondary level.<sup>15</sup> This is actually an improvement over 1984, when only two states required arts for a high school diploma.

Traditionally, in the U.S., “required core curriculum” has referred to reading, writing, mathematics, and science. The definition has undergone a transformation in recent years, triggered in part by President George W. Bush’s 2002 *No Child Left Behind* education initiative. “Core academic subjects” are now considered to be English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography.<sup>16</sup>

A 2004 communiqué from the former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige to school district superintendents sought to clarify and more clearly outline why the President had included the arts as a core academic subject.<sup>17</sup> Paige affirmed the following key reasons why the arts had been included the *No Child Left Behind* program, and were eligible for special funding. Arts education had:

- Intrinsic value and made a positive impact on students’ general academic achievement,
- A positive impact on students’ social and emotional development and enhanced cognitive development,
- A critical role in developing the student’s “crucial thinking skills and motivations they need to achieve at higher levels,” and
- The potential to help students succeed in school and in life, and thus was an important component of a “complete education.”

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning, a public-private coalition formed in 2002 to create a model for learning that would help prepare students for the new century, has endorsed the expanded definition of “core academic subjects” because it more accurately reflects the demands of the 21st-century workplace and community.<sup>18</sup> Even so, many school systems continue

to focus in on reading, writing, mathematics, and science to the neglect of other areas that are integral to a well-rounded and complete education.<sup>19</sup>

Caroline Kennedy, in her first piece for *Time* magazine’s new feature “The Power of One,” chose to write about Verone Kennedy (no relation to Caroline) as an example of someone who had risen above the challenges of his childhood. The tough neighborhood in which Verone grew up was plagued with drugs, gangs, and racial strife, with many of his friends dropping out of school and ending up in jail or dead. Verone had



little interest in school until the 11th grade, when an art teacher observed that he had an aptitude for sketching and painting. Verone discovered that as he developed his portfolio, he experienced newfound success in art, and there was a positive effect on his other academic subjects as well.<sup>20</sup>

When finances are tight and cutbacks must be made in Adventist schools, arts education is often the first area to be cut. Budget shortfalls cause school boards and principals to focus on providing core academic subjects rather than ensuring a wholistic curriculum for all students. Teachers of music and the visual arts are seen as expendable, and as a result, these subjects are too often taught by volunteers or people lacking the appropriate certification and endorsements. In response to my survey, an academy visual-arts teacher wrote: “One of the biggest hurdles is the perception that music is important but art

seems to take a back seat, and we do not get the publicity or the funding to run a strong program. When there are cuts, this is one of the first areas to be cut,” even though research indicates that art education has a positive impact on student learning in other academic areas.

The National School Boards Association and Americans for the Arts, convened in 2004 to discuss how to improve arts edu-

there are many ways to see and interpret the world.

- *The arts teach children that in complex problem solving, purposes are seldom fixed but change with circumstance and opportunity.* Arts education requires the ability and a willingness to surrender to the unanticipated possibilities of the work as it unfolds.

- *The arts make vivid the fact that neither words in their literal form nor numbers exhaust what we can know.* The parameters of our language do not define the limits of our cognition.

- *The arts teach students that small differences can have large effects, and highlight the importance of subtleties.*

- *The arts teach students to think through and within a material.* Art forms employ various methods through which images become real.

- *The arts help children learn to express what cannot be said.* When children are invited to tell what a work of art helps them feel, they must reach into their poetic capacities to find the words and methods that will do the job.



cation in American public schools. They observed that the arts serve as a “critical component to a complete education,” and that there was compelling evidence that when students consistently participated in “comprehensive, sequential, and rigorous arts programs,” they were:

- Four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement;
- Three times more likely to be elected to class office;
- Four times more likely to participate in a math and science fairs;
- Three times more likely to win an award for school attendance; and
- Four times more likely to win an award for writing an essay or poem.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, music and the visual arts must be regarded as an integral component of the “harmonious education” of students in the 21st century, based on brain research on student learning and because of arts education’s broader impact and implications for learning. Elliot Eisner, professor of education at Stanford University and the author of several books and articles on the importance of the arts in education, offers these 10 reasons why the arts should be an integral part of the core curriculum:

- *The arts teach children to make good judgments about qualitative relationships.* Unlike much of the curriculum in which correct answers and rules prevail, in the arts, students learn to make value judgments.
- *The arts teach children that problems can have more than one solution and that questions can have more than one answer.*
- *The arts celebrate multiple perspectives, showing students that*



## Budget shortfalls cause school boards and principals to focus on providing core academic subjects rather than ensuring a holistic curriculum for all students.

- *The arts enable students to have experiences they can have from no other source and through such experience to discover the range and variety of what humans are capable of feeling.*
- *The arts' position in the school curriculum indicates to students what adults regard as important.*<sup>22</sup>

One example highlights what can happen when children are exposed to music at an early age and given the opportunity to develop this talent. The National System of Youth and Children's Orchestras of Venezuela, known locally as *El Sistema* (the System), provides music instruction to any child in the country who wants it. The program began in 1975 with 11 children and volunteer teachers who met in a garage. Described as "the most important happening in music anywhere in the world,"<sup>23</sup> the program currently enrolls close to half a million children in 120 centers and has more than 200 orchestras for children and youth. It is estimated that more than 250,000 youngsters have received free instrument and music lessons through the System.

Gustavo Dudamel, who began violin lessons at the age of 4, is undoubtedly the most renowned graduate of the System. At the age of 8, after returning from a concert with his parents, he was fascinated with the conductor's ability to "use an instrument that no one hears" and began to "conduct" orchestras at home as he listened to music. His first conducting "job" was a program of renaissance dances when he was 13 years old. Today, at 25, he has conducted more than a dozen orchestras.<sup>24</sup> He was recently named the music director and principal conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic beginning with the 2009-2010 season.<sup>25</sup>

Venezuela, with a population of only about 26 million, has thus developed a model that challenges the thinking and practices of other developed countries and has had a positive impact on the lives of participants. In an interview with a British newspaper, Dudamel observed that "Music changed my life. I can look back now and see that many of the boys from my class went on to become involved in drugs and crime. Those who played music did not."<sup>26</sup>

The power of music to transform, challenge, and energize an individual, even a child, was eloquently expressed by a 10-year old flutist in the Home Box Office documentary *Music in Me*, when she said "If I was a glass and music was in me, I would be overflowing!"<sup>27</sup>

In the concluding pages of the book *Education*, Ellen White wrote that "something better" must be the watchword for Adventist education.<sup>28</sup> Can we afford to do less than our counterparts in public education? Can we honestly assert that we are providing quality Adventist education without a strong arts program? An education in music *and* the visual arts must be seen as essential components of the core curriculum.

Adventist schools have served the church well and have produced professionals who continue to serve our institutions and support the global work of the denomination. To keep the flame of quality Adventist education burning, we must provide a truly "harmonious" education that includes an emphasis on music and the visual arts. ☞



**Dr. Thambi Thomas**, Coordinator for this special issue on fine arts in Adventist schools, is an Associate Director of Education for the Pacific Union Conference in Westlake Village, California.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. S. Paul Reville, "Stop the Narrowing of the School Curriculum by 'Right-Sizing' School Time," 27:9 (October 23, 2007), pp. 30, 36. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/10/23/09reville.h27.html?tmp=898689747>. Retrieved July 22, 2008.
2. Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1930), p. 291.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. \_\_\_\_\_, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1948), vol. 7, p. 116.
6. \_\_\_\_\_, *Messages to Young People*, p. 294.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 292.
8. Howard Gardner, "Multiple Intelligences: A Theory for Everyone": [http://www.education-world.com/a\\_curr/curr054.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr054.shtml). Retrieved December 21, 2006.
9. Eric Jensen, *Music With the Brain in Mind* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2000), p. 3.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
11. \_\_\_\_\_, *Arts With the Brain in Mind* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001), p. 18.
12. <http://www.aep-arts.org/resources/toolkits/criticallinks/criticallinks.pdf>. Retrieved August 6, 2008.
13. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 13.
14. Thambi Thomas, *Survey of Arts Courses Taught in Academies in the North American Division* (2007). <http://www.puonline.org>.
15. Jensen, *Arts With the Brain in Mind*, op cit., p. iv.
16. *No Child Left Behind Act of 2002*, Title IX, Part A, Sec. 9101 (11), p. 8: <http://www.symphony.org/govaff/what/pdf/nslb.pdf>. Retrieved January 24, 2007.
17. <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/040701.html>. Retrieved January 24, 2007.
18. [http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=82&Itemid=40](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=82&Itemid=40). Retrieved July 21, 2008.
19. Thomas Armstrong, *The Best Schools* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006), p. 23.
20. Caroline Kennedy, "The King of Crown Heights," *Time* (February 5, 2007), pp. 58, 59.
21. [http://www.americansforthearts.org/information\\_services/arts\\_education\\_community/](http://www.americansforthearts.org/information_services/arts_education_community/). Retrieved July 21, 2008.
22. <http://www.naea-reston.org/tenlessons.html>. Retrieved July 21, 2008.
23. <http://www.askonasholt.co.uk/green/green/home.nsf/ArtistDetails/Gustavo%20Dudamel>. Retrieved July 21, 2008.
24. <http://www.abbadiani.it/guppy/articles.php?lng=fr&pg=181>. Retrieved July 21, 2008.
25. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/28/magazine/28dudamel-t.html>. Retrieved July 21, 2008.
26. Chris Kraul and Chris Pasles, "Class Leader," *The Los Angeles Times* (December 31, 2006), p. F8.
27. [http://www.hbofamily.com/apps/schedule/ScheduleServlet?ACTION\\_DETAIL=DETAIL&FOCUS\\_ID=614557](http://www.hbofamily.com/apps/schedule/ScheduleServlet?ACTION_DETAIL=DETAIL&FOCUS_ID=614557). Retrieved September 15, 2008.
28. Ellen White, *Education*, p. 296.