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# Arts Education: Investment in Education, Opportunity for Social Policy or Instrumentalisation of Culture?

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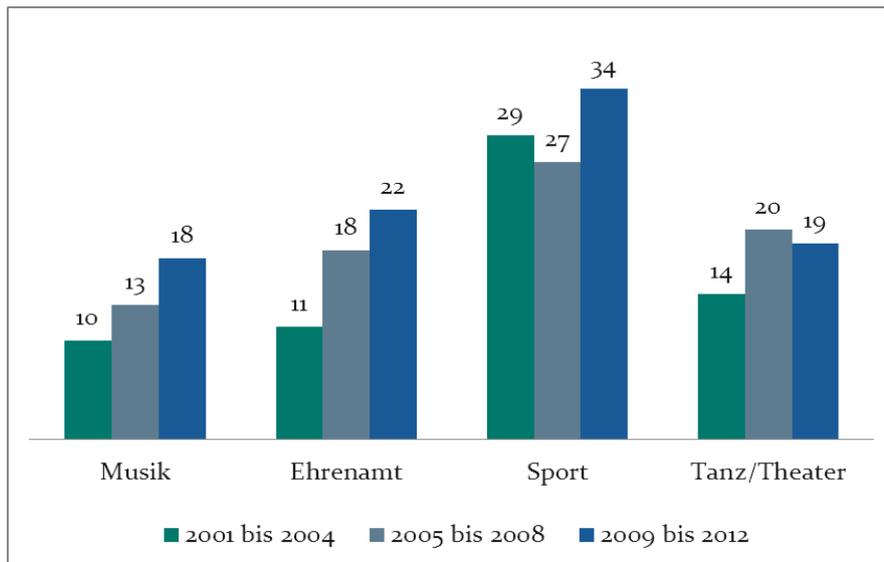
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The role of arts education in our society is increasingly becoming the subject of fierce debate. Is it losing significance, with culture being the victim of austerity policies and young people no longer having time for music school due to increasing stress levels at school? Does the promotion of cultural participation present new opportunities for social policy? Or is culture being instrumentalised for educational purposes?

This article discusses the arguments of these debates from a perspective of education economics. At least the current state of research can serve to alleviate fears: Neither can we observe an instrumentalisation of culture, nor can arts education viably serve as a universal remedy for educational policy ambitions.

## **In spite of shortening the duration of upper secondary school: More and more young people are playing music**

The reduction in the time spent at upper secondary school in Germany from nine to eight years, as goes popular opinion, means that today young people no longer have any leisure time. Especially they do not have any time to pursue hobbies such as music or sport. And yet a weekly report from the German Institute for Economic Research, DIW Berlin, finds empirical evidence, based on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study, for the very opposite: more and more young people are pursuing educationally oriented leisure activities. The study finds, for example, that the share of 16 year olds who are learning an instrument outside of school and play it at least once a week has increased from 10 to 18 percent between 2001 and 2012.



Development of the share of 16 year olds who participate in music, voluntary work, sport and dance/theatre (2001-2012, figures in percent) Source: Hille, Arnold und Schupp (2014): [Leisure Behavior of Young People: Education-Oriented Activities Becoming Increasingly Prevalent](#). DIW Economic Bulletin 1/2014, page 28

Nor does the reduction in the number of years spent at upper secondary school seem to play a role in artistic leisure activity participation.

A study on “Media, culture, and sport” shows that 44 percent of pupils from eight-year upper secondary schools play music in non-formal, extracurricular contexts, while just 40 percent of pupils at nine-year upper secondary schools do the same (Grgic & Züchner 2013, 229).

### Music is increasingly being viewed as an investment in education

One possible reason to explain the increasing participation in educational leisure activities is that they are increasingly being viewed as an investment in education. The Association of German Music Schools (Verband deutscher Musikschulen) found that the number of pupils in basic subjects such as early musical education is growing, i.e. for offers that are ostensibly launched at the initiative of the parents.

Young people themselves also have an eye on education. “Learning something” is, after fun, the most important reason for playing music, a response given by more than 50% of young people.

In politics, too, the term “arts education” has garnered greater attention for many years now. Initially listed in the recommendations of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs on cultural education for children and young people in 2007, arts education was taken up in the national education report in 2012 as a core topic and a comprehensive review was presented.

The increasing relevance of cultural leisure activities as an investment in education is nevertheless the subject of heated debate, as the following arguments show.

## **Music teaches skills that are important for success in school and at work**

Today, research in the economics of education has now largely reached a consensus: Besides academic achievement, so-called non-cognitive skills are the most important factors for success at school and on the jobs market. This includes personality traits such as diligence, ambition or the conviction to be able to influence one's own fate. Developing these traits can especially be fostered during childhood by familial and extra-familial factors.

The increasing participation in non-formal educational offers such as music is among other things a result of the expectation that such cognitive and non-cognitive skills are honed there. There is a belief that music makes you intelligent and also promotes diligence, ambition and confidence. Additionally, thanks to the music-specific context of the interaction with teachers and pupils, it helps to develop both cultural and social capital. Finally, there is the signal effect that is achieved by participating in extracurricular music lessons. A pupil is viewed by the teacher as superior, irrespective of their actual performance, because he or she attends music school in the afternoon.

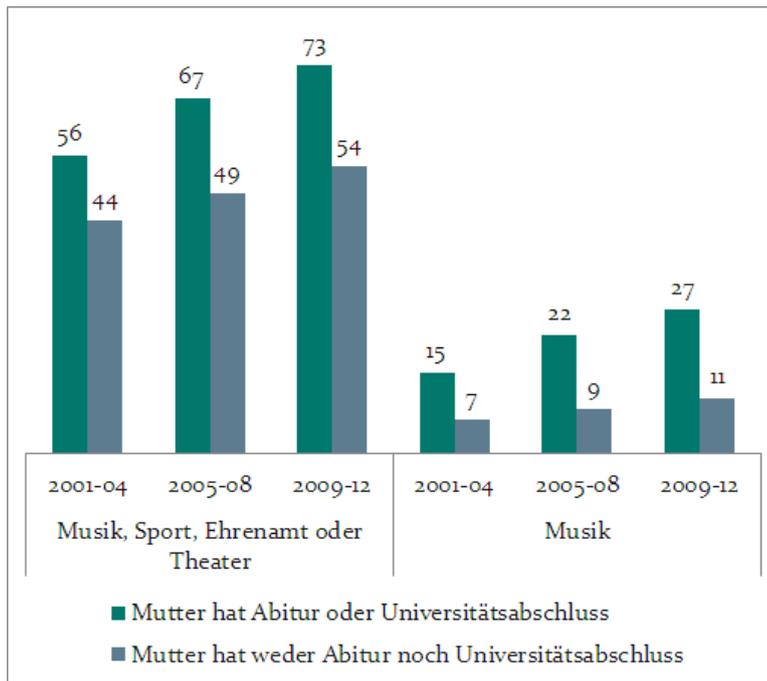
What scientific evidence is there to support these hypotheses? A current study conducted by the OECD is examining the state of research on the educational effects of artistic activities. Empirical proof has so far only been found to support the positive impact of music on intelligence. In a Canadian experimental study, a randomly selected group of children received a year of piano lessons or singing lessons, while the other study participants took theatre or did not receive any special treatment.

Apart from these findings, it has not been possible to definitively establish whether cultural education activities can produce effects other than those mentioned above. This is primarily down to the fact that children who pursue musical activities generally come from socially better-situated families. It is therefore difficult to separate the impact of family background from the effect of music. Even if aspects such as income or the education of the parents are factored in using statistical methods, it cannot be ruled out that more ambitious parents will register their children at a music school and at the same time influence academic performance and personality development. A study by DIW Berlin however believes it to be unlikely that family background is solely responsible for the large differences between the skills of young people who play music and those who do not play music.

Even if the impact of non-formal musical education could be established without any doubt, it would still leave the question of whether similar effects could also be achieved through other activities such as sport or voluntary work.

## **Arts education as a socio-political opportunity**

Under the assumption of positive educational effects, reference is also made to the opportunities for social policy that cultural education projects offer. Participation in educational recreational offers such as music still depends greatly on the educational background of the parents. This social inequality has not been reduced over the last ten years.



Development of the share of 16 year olds who participate in music, voluntary work, sport and dance/theatre (according to the level of education of the parents, 2001-2012, figures in percent); source: our own calculations on the basis of the SOEP survey v29)

The German Bundestag, too, is already addressing the lack of educational equity in the field of arts education. Various measures aim to provide remedy. The expansion of all-day schooling among other things aims to shift leisure into the purview of the schools and thus decouple it from a family's financial situation. The education and participation package in the area of social and labour market policy also promotes membership in clubs. Furthermore, publicly funded projects such as "Jedem Kind ein Instrument" or "Kultur macht stark" encourage universal participation in arts education in a number of federal states.

A final assessment of the success of the named measures is not yet possible. In all-day schools at least, access to cultural leisure activities seems to depend less on the social background, even if not all studies come to this conclusion (Grgic & Züchner 2013, 225). The education and participation package, at least up until 2012, could not be viewed as a success in terms of membership in clubs: Only three percent of eligible young people joined a club in the first year of funding through the educational and participation package. The "Jedem Kind ein Instrument" programme, however, has shown that participation beyond the obligatory first year does not seem to be determined by social background. As of 2014, no meaningful findings have been produced on the effects of this project with regards to educational outcomes.

### Against the instrumentalisation of culture

The focus on the educational impact of cultural leisure activities is not viewed in a solely positive light. Opponents of this development fear an instrumentalisation of culture. They argue that culture is part of education, it should not be used to impact

upon education. Nor should arts education be drawn upon to correct “negative developments and shortcomings in educational policy”.

These arguments can be set against numerous findings that serve to assuage any concerns. According to a survey conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, learning a music instrument is the most effective way of getting children acquainted with classical music. Furthermore, cultural participation is listed ahead of expected educational impacts as the aim of projects such as “Jedem Kind ein Instrument”. Even the OECD stresses that learning artistic skills should be at the forefront of arts education.

### Leisure time should be for relaxation, not for education

Finally, the intense use of leisure time for non-formal education is subject to criticism by those who see today’s youth at risk of excessive nurturing. Leisure time should not be for education, but instead for regeneration and relaxation. Instead of fostering their child’s independence, so-called “helicopter parents” have caused young people to become less independent and less happy.

In this case, too, empirical findings offer reassurance. The “Media, culture and sport” study shows that almost all children and young people cite fun as the most important reason to pursue musical activities. Additionally, the previously cited weekly report of DIW Berlin discovered that young people who spend part of their leisure time on educational activities are generally much happier with their life than other young people. And this is the case regardless of the educational background and income of their parents.

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