

WHY WE NEED ARTS EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This review synthesizes previous research findings regarding the benefits of arts education, particularly in the visual arts, to suggest future educational directions in the United States. It recognizes the current trend in public education emphasizing accountability, which has resulted in diminishing attention to arts education. Participation in arts education may not directly result in improved achievement on standardized tests; however, arts education benefits students in several critical ways, improving students' mental health, self-confidence, and life skills. Arts education also helps foster creativity, and sustains the natural creativity of young children. Suggestions for future research directions in education are discussed.

The perceived value of arts education rises and falls with trends in the fields of education, intelligence, and learning. Changing philosophies over time have affected the ways arts programs are delivered in schools and how arts courses are taught (Eisner, 2002). In public education, arts education is often a victim of social and political forces, making the interpretation and purpose of the arts a social and political process (Eisner, 2002). Public education is expected to prepare students for jobs, and in this environment, arts education is losing its status among academic subjects (Fowler, 1996). Educational policies and practices are a reflection of the values America holds, and drive what happens to the arts in both the curriculum and the classroom.

Recently, schools have been regulated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and other policies to ensure that they bridge the achievement gap and account for all children. Under NCLB, arts education is diminished in favor of mathematics and reading (Aprill, 2001; Chapman, 2005). Only 43% of elementary students receive arts instruction for an average of only 77 minutes per week (Gullatt, 2007, 2008). Visual art and music have seen an average 57 minutes decrease (a reduction of 35%) per week in instructional time, compared to time devoted to those subjects prior to NCLB (Center on Educational Policy, 2008). Conversely, the Center for Education Policy (2007) reported that 62% of the 349 school districts surveyed have increased instructional time in English/ language arts and mathematics in an attempt to meet the minimum standards requirement of NCLB.

The U.S. Department of Education and the National Assessment of Educational Progress arts education framework agree that arts education is essential for complete child development (Diket & Brewer, 2011). NCLB lists the arts under core subjects, but in reality arts education does not appear to be perceived as a valued component of a good education (Chapman, 2005; Dorn, 2005). No state under NCLB can use scores from the arts, humanities, and foreign language to bolster evidence of making Adequate Yearly Progress (Chapman, 2005). Essentially, arts education is considered to involve the emotional rather than intellectual aspect of the person (Eisner, 2002).

ARTS EDUCATION: IMPACT ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Current social and political expectations demand that educational efforts have specific and instrumental benefits (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004). Research shows that arts education promotes various positive cognitive habits and leads to positive effects on learning in other disciplines (Winner, Hetland, Veenema, Sheridan, & Palmer, 2006). Studies have verified connections between the arts and improved academic performance (Gazzaniga, 2008; Posner, Rothbart, Sheese, & Kieras, 2008), confidence (Eilber, 2009), and higher-level thinking related to increased academic achievement (Arts, Culture and the National Agenda, 2001; Gilligan, 2001; Lindstrom, 2009; Rabkin & Redmond, 2006; Ruppert, 2006), quality education, improved school climates, and teacher effectiveness (Eilber, 2009). Students participating in arts education score higher on the SAT (Catterall, 1998; Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanga, 1999), and those SAT scores are correlated positively with the number of years of enrollment in the arts (Ruppert, 2006). This relationship also holds true for students with low SES (Catterall et al., 1999).

Beyond its impact on academic achievement, arts education can help students develop entrepreneurial-type skills. The emergence of a creative economy makes it important for students to develop entrepreneurial skills because companies increasingly rely on creative professionals to trigger business

innovation (Oakley, Sperry, & Pratt, 2008). The fluidity inherent in artistic expression encourages many abilities that would appear to benefit the creative economy, including abstract reasoning, active thinking, and decision making under uncertainty.

ARTS EDUCATION: ARTS FOR ARTS' SAKE

The outcomes of arts education extend beyond its instrumental benefits. Children who are involved in activities that capture their interest and focus more on mastery goals than performance goals are more motivated and engaged (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Arts education provides opportunities to appreciate multiple perspectives on a single subject, thus emphasizing the values of artistic interpretations, building self-respect, and respect for artistic interpretations of others (Gardner, 2004). This can trigger interest in other disciplines, and create eager students, helping to prevent early school dropout (KEA European Affairs, 2009; Venable, 2005).

Arts education can benefit self-expression in several ways. For example, students can express themselves and their understandings of the world more readily through arts education than through other disciplines (Malchiodi, 2003). Furthermore, the relationships students develop during participation in arts education through collaborative experiences promote a sense of responsibility and connectedness to community (Davis, 2008), thereby providing a non-verbal means for expression and conflict resolution (Kagan, 2009).

Arts education can improve emotional wellbeing. Research has shown that when arts education is made accessible on a continuous basis, it can have positive effects on emotions (Lee, 2011; Malchiodi, 2003, 2007) and self-perceptions (Lee, 2011). Art making is known to promote emotional balance (Silver, 1999). Furthermore, arts education can engender a sense of calm in children (Malchiodi, 2007), and it can offer relief from daily chaos and feelings of helplessness in children who suffer mentally (Moon, 1995).

ARTS EDUCATION: ROLE IN THERAPY

In both ancient and contemporary times, the arts have been used to promote physical and psychological wellness. This is most directly visible when visual art is used in art therapy to improve health and recovery (Evans & Dubowski, 2001). The beneficial effects of art therapy include improved mood, confidence, self-expression, self-awareness and self-acceptance, insight, and general psychological wellbeing (Crawford & Patterson, 2007; Field & Kruger, 2008). Because it focuses on non-verbal communication, visual art provides a psychologically trusting and safe environment where individuals can express strong emotions (Harden, Rosales, & Greenfield, 2004). Since the 1940s, formal efforts have

been made to combine art therapy with psychotherapy, making it a part of psychotherapeutic and psychiatric therapy (Crawford & Patterson, 2007; Waller, 1991). Individuals engaged in art therapy can develop more complex cognitions and greater problem-solving ability, have greater ability to interpret material in diverse ways, have an enhanced sense of self-determination, and are less likely to feel helpless or depressed (Crawford & Patterson, 2007; Field & Kruger, 2008).

ARTS EDUCATION: IMPACT ON STUDENTS AT RISK

Probing the benefits of arts education for students at risk is relatively new to research on the arts, but positive benefits seem to occur in environments such as juvenile detention centers (Venable, 2005). Approximately 35% of high school dropouts are unemployed (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001). Unemployed high school dropouts are three times more likely to be arrested than high school graduates (e.g., Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001), and earn lower wages than high school graduates over a lifetime (Berkthold, Gies, & Kaufman, 1998). High school dropouts are more likely to engage in substance abuse than their peers (e.g., Drapela, 2006; Hoffman, 2002). Re-offense rates can be reduced by 20% through quality education (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001), including successful arts education. This is because arts education can help incarcerated individuals reconnect with humanity and develop personal control (Williams, 2002). Mural projects in cities (Judith Baca's *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* and Jane Golden's *Philadelphia Mural Arts Program*) validate the benefits of arts-related skill building (Venable, 2005).

ARTS EDUCATION: IMPACT ON CREATIVITY

Creativity can also be fostered through arts education (Fowler, 1996). Drawing is a universal mode for communication, and professionals such as architects, engineers, mathematicians, geologists, physicists, and sociologists incorporate drawing as a means to think, process, and communicate effectively (Goertz, 1991). Because drawing underpins the ability to see and think fluidly, it facilitates the flow of ideas and creativity (Goertz, 1991; see also Dorn, 1999).

Children are powerfully affected by the visual arts, and often construct their understanding of the world in drawing (Katz, 1998). If not nurtured, the expressiveness and spontaneity in children's drawings and artwork is lost by middle school (Eisner, 2002). The consideration of possibilities and use of imagination allows children to recognize the influence they wield over their own creativity (Eisner, 2002). Art-making also encourages the ability to express

observations in symbolic form to convey understanding, thereby developing creativity (Fowler, 1996). The holistic nature of creativity, aided by arts education, can break boundaries between the arts and sciences, and help children see relationships and synthesize information in novel ways (Davis, 2008; Lynch, 2007; Pink, 2007; see also McCarthy et al., 2004).

Climate plays a very important role in influencing creativity. For example, school climates can stimulate students' creative potential when they encourage independence, flexibility, and self-exploration (Niu, 2007; see also Fowler, 1996). Opportunities for playful experimentation, easy access to resources and information, mentoring and role modeling, motivational strategies and open-ended assignments can also contribute to developing a creative learning climate (Davies, 2004). Emphasis on process and effort, rather than product and results, is better for encouraging students' originality. A non-threatening climate renders diverse ideas and competing viewpoints acceptable and allows for explorations of alternative approaches (Anderson & West, 1998). Repressive, anti-creative school climates can encourage students to react with maladaptive behaviors, including underachievement and dropping out (Kim & Hull, 2012; Kim & VanTassel-Baska, 2010). The promotion of playful inquiry, mentoring models, and self-directed learning via art education can foster a creative climate, encouraging students to be more inquisitive and experimental.

The creative school climate requires that teachers understand the arts, and learn how to work with them as important teaching tools. Whether arts education nurtures students' creativity depends on the way the arts are learned and taught. If the skills of artistic expression are taught to students in repetitious, imitative, and meaningless formats, then students will not exercise their minds in creative ways (Fowler, 1996). This is because children will perform as directed and will not experiment, evaluate, and translate their intuitions into artistic expressions. Students should be encouraged to develop their thinking and artistic imaginations before being taught the skills required to *do* the arts (Munro, 1941). Arts education should consist of strategies that promote innovation, critical reflection, divergent thinking, improvisation, and experiential learning, and students should be able to connect with their education through practice-based learning and experimentation (European League of Institutes of the Arts, 2008). Unfortunately, arts education in elementary and middle schools in the United States falls primarily to classroom teachers who do not have training in the arts, and are therefore less able to integrate them in the curriculum. Teachers commonly assign previously developed project ideas and tightly-structured lessons (Gnezda, 2011; Perkins & Carter, 2011; Szekely, 1988). This means that students' experiences with the arts in the school environment offer little room for creativity.

The creative school climate also requires establishing partnerships between students and external arts institutions, artists, and creative professionals, which allows them to experience the creative process in an authentic way

(KEA European Affairs, 2009). This will help students strike the right balance between free and intuitive experimentation and guidance and mentoring (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

SUGGESTIONS TO EDUCATORS AND POLICY MAKERS

The continued NCLB emphasis on accountability in the United States neglects crucial basic needs of students. This emphasis siphons much of the enthusiasm from teachers' efforts to nurture creativity in their students through the arts and other creative endeavors (Smith & Smith, 2010). Ensuring that an educational framework for creative development is in place requires a system that balances academic achievement with more holistic human development. Arts education provides opportunities for the interplay between expression and reflection, bringing about meaningful and measurable benefits in domains outside of those found currently in most academic achievement tests. Specifically, experiences facilitated by arts education produce mentally, socially, physically, and academically fit citizens (Dorn, 2005). The arts can also initiate protective factors in schools that help establish students' long-term capacities for academic achievement, social competency, positive behavior, and emotional wellbeing (Whelley, Cash, & Bryson, 2003, 2004), thus reducing situations that lead to at-risk behavior (Williams, 2002).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several gaps in the existing published research exist: (a) few studies to date focus on the benefits of the arts for middle school students, but rather concentrate on the elementary school students; (b) limited data are available for rural schools because the majority of studies are conducted in urban settings; (c) the visual arts are seldom isolated from the arts in general, so any distinct benefits that might exist are hidden; (d) students' emotional wellbeing in relation to arts education has not been researched broadly despite the acknowledgment of the need for holistic education; (e) limited data have been published on students' perceptions about arts participation; (f) meta-analyses of the benefits of arts education should be conducted, using various moderators including students' grade levels, gender, and backgrounds, and teachers' training, characteristics, and experiences; (g) different instruction methods for arts education, over both short terms and long terms, should be evaluated for effectiveness (see Smith & Smith, 2010); (h) teacher-training programs for arts education that emphasize the benefits of arts education should be examined for effectiveness; and (i) school climate for creativity should be assessed and related to the quality and quantity of the benefits of arts education. More research in these areas should translate what

is known about arts education to application in general education, thereby truly leaving no child behind.

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