

Arts Education for Goodness Sake!

Our time as education leaders is often dominated by our professional, community, and familial obligations. But we can all appreciate the pleasures of reading a good book, listening to a favorite CD, or seeing a special play. In fact, enjoying and reflecting on exposure to literature, music, drama, and the visual arts invites introspection that can relieve our stress, stimulate our senses, and open our minds to a multitude of diverse sights, sounds, and experiences. Even more significant is what they contribute to giving us a more comprehensive understanding of the world and our place in it.

This is what arts education does for children by enabling them to draw upon their use of the visual, dramatic and musical arts in constructing new dimensions of meaning that enhance their learning. Volumes of research attest to the positive impact of the arts on teaching and learning, and to the value of arts education in discovering talents, stimulating academic interests, and awakening an awareness of the vast possibilities of life. Using the arts in teaching unleashes the potential of the creative mind.

Arts and Academics

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act defines art as a core academic subject, and this has enhanced arts education in many schools and districts. However, for a variety of reasons, including unfunded NCLB mandates, a number of states have reported declines in the amount of time and resources devoted to the arts. This is a shame, because the academic benefits of high-quality arts education are clear. Researchers have linked arts education with improving reading and mathematics skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving. In fact, studies have shown that children actively engaged in the arts are likely to have higher test scores than those with little to no involvement.

Although many of the significant benefits of arts education cannot be easily measured, there are notable correlations in the literature substantiating its value. For example, characteristics like enhanced motivation to learn, bolstered self-confidence, creative expression, and advanced social skills such as collaboration, tolerance, and conflict resolution are cited as indicators of the impact of arts education on student learning and development.

By educating students in the arts, and incorporating arts into content area instruction, schools engage the whole child by tapping into his or her multiple intelligences. In fact, the whole-child initiative stems in part from the premise that



all children are different and learn differently. Thus, schools do students a distinct disservice if opportunities for exercising their creative talents and interests are not provided. In addition to increasing academic achievement for all students, research findings show that arts education also improves academic outcomes for at-risk learners, including students with disabilities and those from low-income families.

Arts and the Global Economy

Today's schools are charged with educating students for bright futures, and that includes preparing them to compete in a global economy. Our children must develop skills demanded by the 21st century work force, including critical thinking, creative problem-solving, effective communication, and teamwork. Popular concepts about future economies, such as Thomas Friedman's vision of a "flat world" and Daniel Pink's idea that everyone needs to tap into *A Whole New Mind*, speak to the appreciation and demand for artistic talents. For example, Harvard education professor Howard Gardner predicts that the most useful talents in the future will include creativity and awareness and appreciation of difference—skills that are developed and strengthened by learning through the arts.

Principals know that a curious, creative spirit is key to complex problem-solving, and that preparing 21st century learners requires more than fortifying them with core academic skills. In order for our students to compete in a global society, they will need to master the most intrinsic element of the whole-child movement: a desire to imagine, innovate, and create. Even minimal exposure to arts education helps develop the whole child in ways that assure these results. Just imagine the impact if arts education was embraced fully and integrated wholly into every school's curriculum. It would unleash the talents of all children, helping them to succeed academically, giving them more self-confidence, teaching them to be open and tolerant, and keeping them engaged in school.

Given the overwhelming evidence of the value of the arts in enhancing teaching and learning, it is imperative that educational budgets be expanded to encompass professional development for teachers toward better understanding and using the arts in all classrooms. While closing the achievement gap between American children and those of foreign countries may be a desirable result, the real gain will be in closing the gap between teaching and learning by enabling all children to reach their fullest academic, social, and emotional potential. Further, the sheer joy and wonder evoked by the arts cannot be overestimated.

Yes, we need arts education for academics' sake. And, yes, we also need arts education for the global economy's sake. But, most of all, we need arts education in our schools for goodness sake! 

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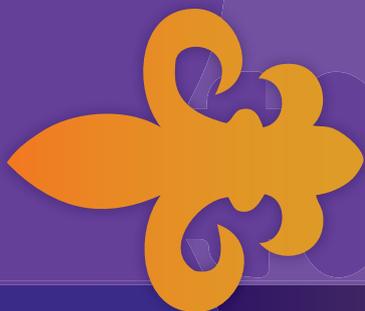
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