

Exploring the Benefits of Art in Elementary Education

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Beneficial Art. I have always felt that I have had some connection to art on some level, since I was a child. I can remember trying to prolong art assignments in elementary school for as long as I could. I preferred not to go on to math or social studies because I would rather spend my time working on art and creating something that I was truly satisfied with and proud of. Frequently I would not entirely complete art assignments and I would feel slightly uncomfortable about them being displayed on the classroom wall. I am sure that to my teachers and the majority of my fellow students art time was merely that, a brief period of art lasting no more than twenty-five minutes and when it was done it was done, but I longed for it to last an entire day or more.

Being exposed to art often throughout my college experience has really made me come to understand that there are many positive outcomes possible. Younger children are typically more apt to enjoy drawing and coloring and are usually not resistant to being exposed to art. From the time that children are barely beginning to go to school the use of art materials helps them to become more aware of and comfortable with their surroundings, both physically and mentally.

I worry that art is disappearing from too many classrooms, particularly outside of the younger grades in elementary school. I observed in a fourth grade classroom for two months in which there was no art instruction, and its absence was horrible. I know that art can enhance children's learning and for many children can provide a healthy outlet from traditional teaching methods as it did for me. Art is not a component of the state standardized tests that are given every year and so it is vanishing from the classroom.

Art in the elementary classroom has great beneficial effects on student learning by stimulating the multiple intelligences present in a typical group of students. Art activities can serve as a bridge to understanding for students; in addition, art has the potential to act as therapy for students with emotional issues. During early development, students who have difficulty verbalizing ideas can use art as an alternative way to express themselves. With the current emphasis on standardization and high stakes testing, art has lost a place in the curriculum, to the disservice of the students emotionally and cognitively. Unfortunately, a typical classroom teaches primarily to visual and auditory learners while leaving others by the wayside. Effective use of art in the classroom can bridge learning across all of the multiple intelligences and benefit all types of learners.

The multiple intelligences tend to be neglected in a typical classroom environment. Linguistic and visual learners tend to be the students that thrive best in a traditional classroom environment. If curricula only address those two intelligences a great percentage of students are placed at a disadvantage. Art in the classroom can be used to bridge instruction to many of the less frequently addressed intelligences. The bodily/kinesthetic learner can be reached through performance. Musical learners can create songs for concepts or work to a beat. Most of all, though, art in the classroom makes learning more fun and therefore more meaningful to students.

Students Need Art. This project originated from my observations in various elementary level classrooms. I noticed that in higher grade levels art tended to be less utilized than in lower grades. From my personal viewpoint

it seemed that this deficiency was detrimental to the learning environment. I found that students who had difficulty expressing themselves verbally or through writing could express themselves magnificently through illustration. This was particularly evident at the kindergarten level. Over the past three years I have done over one hundred hours of observation in elementary classrooms and have noticed the effectiveness of art in instruction. My goal is to examine the importance of this neglected area of education.

The following paper is organized into three main sections. In the first section I will discuss how art helps bridge understanding of difficult subjects. Next I will discuss how No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has crippled the art curriculum to the detriment of students. Therefore, in this project, described in the third section, I will show how young students can use art to express themselves as an alternative to verbalization.

Wise Eisner. Thus far in my research, I have found a considerable amount of evidence to suggest that art's influence on children helps them to better succeed academically. There is definitely a correlation between students' involvement with art and their overall academic success. There are many important elements of a child's cognitive development that are enhanced by art. Elliot Eisner, a major advocate for the arts, created a set of examples of the importance of including art in schools called: Ten Reasons to Teach Art. These reasons are listed in Eisner's book entitled *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (2002). One of the most important reasons listed is one that states: "The arts teach children to make good judgments about qualitative relationships. Unlike most of the curriculum in which correct answers and rules prevail, in the arts it is judgment rather than rules that prevail" (Eisner, 2002). This is undoubtedly one of the biggest life lessons of all and it can be well taught through art.

Instilling this quality in children at a young age will help them in becoming more successful adults. Being able to make good judgments is an essential life skill as it is necessary in the workforce, the home and in society in general. Having the ability to use good judgment lends itself to good decision making. Art has the ability to teach essential life lessons and so it too should be an essential subject at all levels of education.

Elliot Eisner has long been recognized for his role not only as a teacher, but also as an advocate for the inclusion of arts in education. I think that what I learned most from Eisner's ten criteria as a whole is that they help to show how students have the ability to attain success not only inside the classroom, but in the world as well. Leaving art out of the curriculum only has the potential to hurt students' chances later in life.

Art as presented by Eisner seems to improve the social attitudes of children. Opening the idea of creativeness and alternativeness to a child allows for greater levels of acceptance and understanding. I think that it is important for students to know that not everyone thinks exactly alike and that alternative approaches to a problem are a good thing. Students will come with their own mix of learning patterns which can either be accepted or regarded as incorrect ways of thinking.

Absence of Art Encourages Standardization.

As teachers we are not raising robots. NCLB assessment is a means of molding students into standard, diligent, and ultimately unthinking individuals. If we do not embrace the teachings of Eisner and take into consideration the benefits of incorporating art we are only setting students up for failure. Allowing for multiple perspectives early in education helps promote understanding and acceptance of others while also helping to create a desire to learn. I do not think that it is healthy for teachers and students to have to fear the classroom because of the current

mandates that are in place. While the problem of NCLB has yet to be solved, it is still important to take into consideration the positive outcomes of integrating art with every other subject.

Recently I have learned one major benefit that art provides. Initially when I first became interested in this subject, I felt that I wanted to describe art as a form of communication. When I watch a Kindergartener draw or paint or create in any way through art, there is something that happens that does not ever happen with any other class activity. It is like witnessing a surge of creativeness; art seems to come more naturally for young children. At the age of only four or five years old, most students are not very advanced in their writing ability. However, with art, children are able to communicate without having to be very proficient writers. If they can successfully communicate something through art they will be more inclined to want to learn how to communicate that same message through writing. Art stimulates their minds and encourages them. This can probably be traced back to the fact that there are no defined rules with art; there are no guidelines. You cannot draw something the wrong size or paint something the wrong color and kids are very accepting of art because art is accepting of them.

Deborah West, an elementary school teacher, discusses art as a language in her article "An Arts Education." She suggests we view art

as a special kind of language. It may take the form of language as we know it, as in a formal critique, or it may be in the form of visual images. Either way, the language of art, similar to what Pond stated, is an effective means of communication. Art encompasses what is tangible and what is imagined, thus balancing realistic representation with abstraction. As artists, young children need to develop the

symbolic tools of literacy in the visual arts (West, 2000).

West is explaining something I myself experienced but always found difficult to express in words. The way kids could light up when starting to draw, and the way they automatically gravitated toward an engagement with their artwork, was directly in response to what art generates for them. Art seems to help the student with their own comprehension of their surroundings as well as to communicate their feelings to others. From my observations, I have collected student drawings that demonstrate great artistic ability, but limited writing ability. Students might not understand the imaginative and literal interpretations of their art, but there is actual substance to it. A student might draw what looks like a tree, but incorporate unrealistic colors because of their own preference. Art allows students to simply express themselves in a medium that is an alternative to verbal or written communication.

The proof is in the pudding. When thinking about the question "Why is it important for my child to learn about art?" I can imagine all sorts of arguments for why art should be left out of the curriculum, but of course know that none of these arguments are valid. These arguments exist within the minds of very ignorant people who probably lacked the privilege of experiencing art when they were children themselves. Art is a gateway to other areas of learning. Through art, children are exposed to math and science. I know that art is often overlooked for all the benefits that it does have simply because people do not realize what art has to offer. Susan Striker argues that "We tend to compartmentalize different subjects and think of art as being quite separate from writing or mathematics. Children are learning scientific and mathematical facts as they work with art materials; removing or subtracting clay as they model, adding on when they create

constructions, experiencing balance as they build” (Striker, 2001). Art in itself is separate from other areas in that it is the only subject that can branch itself out to so many other subjects that require the very same skills. However, while there are many similarities between art and its neighboring subjects, it should still be regarded as something completely special all on its own. Art should be appreciated as it provides so much for young learners.

Joan Bouza Koster also makes the claim that art lends itself to other areas of learning. In her book, *Growing Artists: Teaching Art to Young Children* (2005), Koster promotes the view that “Art and other curriculum areas are interrelated. Art enhances learning in other subjects, and activities in other curriculum areas extend learning in art” (Koster, 2005). Art truly brings out the best in children as it opens their minds to everything else around them. The application of art to other subjects provides a safety zone for students to fall back on when they are struggling or to excel in when they understand. In part due to the manner in which art is graded and judged, students are more willing to take chances with art-inclusive projects when incorporated in the classroom. Teachers tend to grade art more leniently and students know this. Incorporating art across the curriculum can lower inhibitions and put students more at ease in particularly challenging subjects.

While art provides another language for children as well as being applicable to various other subjects, it also aids in physical development. Robert Schirmacher argues that “Art activities provide experience and practice in developing and refining gross motor or large muscle skills. Art involves physical and manipulative activity. While easel painting, children use their entire arms and upper torsos in making large, sweeping motions with paintbrushes” (Schirmacher, 1998). Art helps to facilitate muscle formation. Other forms of art also

incorporate physical activity. Performance art helps students by engaging their bodily-kinesthetic learning styles. Increasing physical activity helps encourage memory retention as well. When students perform in the classroom, not only are they developing physically, but they are also increasing the chance that they will remember and learn more effectively.

Art Influences Student Behavior. Students I observe generally vary in their classroom performance. Students in classrooms incorporating frequent art activities tend to participate more in class. I typically see more students volunteering to answer questions in classes that promote art. When art is left out, the students are generally more reluctant to answer questions. I think this can be explained at least partially by some of Elliot Eisner’s insights. Eisner argues that exposing kids to multiple perspectives through the use of art helps them to become more effective problem solvers. While most subjects heavily emphasized in schools do not allow for more than one correct answer, educators still expect students to answer questions correctly with ease. However, it has been my observation that teachers are often too critical of student answers and some children are genuinely afraid to ask questions. I believe that in art-friendly classrooms where multiple perspectives are presented more openly and frequently, children are more likely to want to voice their opinions. Children are likely to be more productive and have higher success rates if they are encouraged to participate. Part of this success can be attributed to good questioning strategies, but also the inclusion of art in the classroom places emphasis on the correctness of multiple perspectives.

Clearly there is an abundance of benefits to be had by students of all ages. While I would like to focus on younger children and their connection to art, I would also like to emphasize that art should be continued throughout a student’s schooling. Art

stimulates the mind, provides a means of transition to other subjects and builds on physical development. Art truly serves as a building block as it leads to a student's enhancement in the classroom and later in life. Exposure to art and artistic expression contributes to the development of well-rounded individuals. For this reason, as a future teacher, I plan to utilize every opportunity to incorporate and integrate art into my teaching.

Multiple Intelligences for All. Instruction based on Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences has been a staple in classrooms for several decades now, but with the shift towards high-stakes testing, the focus on Multiple Intelligences has been getting pushed aside. So much concentration and emphasis have been given to test-taking skills and addressing the massive curriculum that teachers simply cannot take the time to include any art projects or activities that might focus on the less-taught intelligences. These areas are not areas that can be tested and they are consequently not on any state tests. Precious instruction time is not therefore "sacrificed" for some of these essential areas of understanding and students are suffering. Because the required curriculum is so large, teachers are pressured to move as quickly and efficiently as possible through the grade-designated material. Because of this, the arts and consequently Multiple Intelligences-related instruction are cut.

Unconventional Experimentation. In one instance, a school has seen the benefit of incorporating multiple intelligences into instruction and applying it to standardized testing. In one Maryland school, they decided to incorporate multiple intelligence teaching practices school wide as a constant tool for learning. Their results were excellent. Jan Grenhawk, a teacher at the school notes:

In one year our students' scores on the Maryland Performance Assessment rose by 20 percent. They [the students] remembered information more accurately and were confident enough to use it to solve problems... They demonstrated a flexible approach to problem solving. They were taking traditional pencil-and-paper tests, but using a variety of strategies to complete them. Even students whom we did not consider strong readers or writers were able to use strategies we taught to write good answers. (Grenhawk, 1997)

Multiple intelligences strategies that were taught helped students achieve more than simple memorization and re-gurgitation; students learned how to be true problem-solvers and critical thinkers. The interactive and varied approaches taken toward education helped students apply their knowledge on the standardized state tests. This inclusion, stressing among other things the importance of art, allowed students to actually learn instead of to memorize and forget.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was enacted in 2001 after a strong push from the Bush Administration. The aim of NCLB is to make all students show proficiency in math and reading by 2014. NCLB enforces standardized testing as a way of assessing student and school progress. This approach is criticized by those who believe no single testing method is ever appropriate for all -- or that accurate assessment is impossible when a single measure is emphasized in this manner. Under NCLB, schools face reprimands when their students are not performing at "acceptable" levels. Many students who are presented with standardized tests are second-language English learners and may lack the ability to perform successfully.

In one particular case reported last year, involving Bailey's Elementary School for the Arts and Sciences in Virginia, students were rated as performing under state standardized

testing requirements. The teachers and district administrators for Bailey's argue that reformed testing protocols would more accurately show student achievement levels. Teachers at Bailey were given district approval to supplement testing with "work portfolios" in place of reading tests to assess their ESL students. The portfolios were given to a sample of 169 students. Of these students, 97% passed, meeting federal academic goals (US News & World Report).

Improper assessment through the implementation of NCLB seems to indicate that standardized testing is not effective. Standardized assessments tend to test only the basic knowledge aspect of Bloom's Taxonomy. None of the higher levels of learning are really assessed in the process. This high emphasis on testing is not really relevant to the real world. Students are not learning the skills that are needed for entry into the workforce. Schools are being judged as in need of improvement when in reality it is NCLB that needs to be reformed. Students and teachers alike are suffering. Teachers are being seen as incompetent and not qualified to teach their students required skills. They are forced to modify their teaching in a way that prepares students for testing. The arts are regarded as "frill" aspects of the curriculum and unnecessary.

NCLB claims to be benefiting education by attempting to help struggling students, but clearly it is not doing so. Additionally, at the same time that it is not helping students in need it is taking away from students who are viewed as performing above average. Gifted students are ignored while their fellow classmates are "helped." The focus of NCLB is trying to get failing students to pass standardized tests and therefore prove that teachers and schools are competent as a whole. However, NCLB is only hindering the school system as well as the students who depend on it.

Hypocrisy of No Child Left Behind. NCLB has continued to prove that it is not contributing to the success of our schools. It is seen as an enemy to many teachers and future teachers like myself. Schools must expect the unexpected from their students since NCLB requires that every student is passing standardized tests in every category for their schools to be safe from reprimand. If a school's test scores are deemed too low the school is labeled as underperforming and further action can be taken if the school does not improve.

Welcome Diversity. We happen to live in a country that is full of very diverse individuals. Many families chose to leave their own countries in the hopes of finding better opportunities here in the US. Many students have not had much previous academic success due to the conditions of their former school system. We are supposed to be the welcomed change and yet for many immigrant families it must seem like we are perpetuating failure.

Bring on the Tests. An article in NEA magazine used four schools' data to show that NCLB is doing nothing but hurting our schools and hindering our students. The standardized testing agenda that comes along with NCLB is supposedly aimed at helping students and schools as wholes to progress. For students at Napa High school in California, the tests are helping them to fail.

Many students at Napa High are arriving after leaving their country and culture behind, speaking their native language. It should not be expected that these particular students will easily pass any sort of English proficiency exam, but it is. Scores of the entire school are then lowered because students who could reasonably be expected to fail are failing.

This particular high school has been honored with awards for student achievement in dance, music and journalism classes, and has been deemed a distinguished school. However, the effort of the school's teachers and students is being completely ignored

when students from foreign countries are being unfairly tested. Katy Howard is an English Learner (EL) teacher at Napa High and says that many of her students come from Mexico and are tested very early after arriving at the school. Howard claims “they’re tested too early. They’re tested the minute they arrive. Probably 60 percent of my students are not even proficient in Spanish” (NEA Today January 2008 issue). It seems ridiculous that a school that can be recognized as distinguished and praised for its efforts to incorporate music, dance and journalism so effectively can still be labeled as a school in need of improvement.

When the arts are utilized in the classroom they can have nothing but positive outcomes.

Creative approaches to teaching have proven to be more effective than standardized teaching and testing.

Unfortunately there is a great deal of political strife involved in the administration of the education system. I can only hope that some serious action takes place soon to better the current situation. As a future teacher I am concerned for the wellbeing of the students that I will end up teaching. The multiple intelligences truly need to be implemented in the classroom: all students learn differently and it cannot be expected that all will flourish with the close-minded values of NCLB in place.

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