

Arts Education: Teaching The Whole Child

~ by Esther D'Agrosa

The arts are fundamental resources through which the world is viewed, meaning is created, and the mind developed.

To neglect the contribution of the arts in education, either through inadequate time, resources, or poorly trained teachers is to deny children access to one of the most stunning aspects of their culture and one of the most potent means for developing their minds.

--Elliot W. Eisner, Professor of Education and Art, Stanford University

High stakes testing. No Child Left Behind. Math and Science scores must improve. The education community must respond. For some, the answer to such educational challenges is more drill and more time spent on specific tasks in the "critical" mandatory reporting areas of the curriculum. But will more of the same tactics reach the students who are struggling? Probably not. These students need different approaches that will engage them in becoming motivated learners. Since Jefferson's time, public school goals have valued moral and social education equally with academic instruction. (Noddings.) Instruction in the arts is an ideal vehicle in which to integrate the academic, social, and moral aims of education. Arts education is essential in the curriculum PK-12: not only does education in the arts raise scores on the mandatory tests, (Fowler) but it is pivotal in the development of creativity, innovation, risk taking, critical thinking, problem solving, and imagination. Arts education is the core of teaching the whole child. The value of teaching the whole child has been established. The arts affirm that all learning is connected, thus teaching the whole child.

How Does Education in the Arts Reach the Whole Child?

Active learning is inherent in the arts.

To become literate in the arts, the student must participate in making art. Skills are modeled by the instructor and then practiced by the student. The student must be self-directed to practice in order to improve. Arts teach self-reliance and self-discipline.

Problem solving and divergent thinking give ownership to students.

Arts teach divergent rather than convergent thinking. Once a student has acquired a specific artistic skill, he/she can begin to explore changes. Improvisation using skills that the student has mastered is the next step. Finally the student has a new composition, one that he can call his own. Students quickly grasp that in the arts there are multiple solutions to the same problem. Divergent thinking IS creativity in action.

Teamwork is essential in many art forms.

Participation in many art forms requires teamwork. Each member of the orchestra must be sensitive to every other orchestra member, as well as the conductor. Staging a school

play can only be successful when cast, crew, and director collaborate. Teamwork is essential to develop a whole person.

Students who are at risk are likely to be engaged in the arts.

The arts reach students who are at risk.

Researcher Shirley Brice Heath of Stanford University--not an arts researcher--was charged with studying all forms of after school programs: sports teams, church groups, scout programs, the arts and more. Much to her own surprise, she found that the arts students dramatically outperformed their non-arts connected peers in significant ways. Working with high risk students in inner city east Palo Alto--far from an affluent neighborhood--Heath found that arts students are four times more likely to win academic awards, four times as likely to participate in math and science fairs, and show a significant reduction in these areas without arts experiences. These studies were reinforced by a Harvard study focusing on students working with Shakespeare, work that promotes greater complexity in thinking, greater verbal acuity, tolerance of ambiguity, interpretive skills and increased sense of self-discipline and self-esteem. (Cameron.)

The arts engage students in non-traditional ways.

The arts invite students to explore the affective aspects of life: emotion, spirituality, and empathy. Studies reported in *Critical Links*, state that, "students exposed to the arts gain more empathy and self-control, and develop improved conflict resolution and social-tolerance skills." There is a "UCLA study that proves that high school seniors who participated in the creation of theatre are 40% less likely to tolerate racist behavior than kids who were not theatre participants." (Cameron)

The Twenty-First Century

For those who value the education of the whole child, this is a time of opportunity! Pulitzer-prize winning author Thomas Friedman (*The World is Flat*) and Microsoft CEO Bill Gates are only two of the many experts who have written about the importance of developing imagination and creativity in today's children. In a *flat world* (Friedman), flexibility, adaptability, and creativity are essential qualities for workforce success. Corporate executives are hiring arts consultants to train their employees to become imaginative problem solvers and collaborative creative thinkers. (Friedman)

Many contend that arts education is at the *center* of a renaissance in education. Ken Robinson, a senior advisor for education policy at the Getty Foundation, stated in a 2005 interview: "The most important challenge they (company executives) said was finding people who could make good decisions in times of uncertainty, who can adapt to new opportunities and respond creatively to change," (Bartelme). Those qualities are inherently exemplified in arts instruction.

Studying the Picasso painting, *Guernica*, students and instructors may begin a dialogue about war and its effects. Simultaneously, students may read and discuss the Gunther

Grasse novel, *The Tin Drum*, as well as Grasse's recent revelation about being part of the Third Reich. Students in wind ensemble may perform *In Memoriam Dresden* by Daniel Bukvich. Choral students may perform and/or listen to Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*. The theatre department may stage *Antigone*. Students may create their own war paintings, music, and theatre. All of the above can add depth to a debate about the current war with Iraq, and the Mid-East conflict. The possibilities are endless. The impact for reaching the whole child is enormous.

“As a strong supporter of the arts, I believe that we must all be vigilant to maintain arts education in our schools. The research is very clear that a strong arts program does contribute to academic achievement. But, in my mind this should not be the only reason we would support the arts. The enrichment of our lives, the relationships that are established through group work, and the emphasis on helping students become well-rounded citizens are necessary for a flourishing democracy.”

Judy Jeffrey, Director
Iowa Department of Education

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Ben Cameron, Executive Director: Theatre Communications Group, tcg.org New Times, New Vision

Highlights: Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Achievement and Social Development. <<http://www.aep.org/CL.highlights.doc>>

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