

# Arts Education and Student's Perception

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates students' perceptions of their experience with arts education and their perceptions of its impact on their academic achievement and academic goals. Specifically, it relates to academic achievement, goals, cognition, and students' perceptions. Educational outcomes and policy issues are also reviewed as they related to the future of arts education.

## INTRODUCTION

During the past few decades, school system around the world has been laboring through school reform, overcrowding, teacher shortages, and changes in curriculum emphases. Arts education programs, no doubt because the arts are considered tangential to skills that lead to basic employment, have been labeled unnecessary for the development of academic achievement (Eisner, 1998). A key assumption held by some educators regarding the continuance of arts education in schools has influenced the topic of this study: the importance of student perceptions in evaluating whether arts education has had or is having an influence on their academic lives. To make a case for including arts education in the curriculum, educators must show that such studies are integral to the overall educational plan. Arts educators are increasingly asked to justify their professional existence based upon whether their fields can help to raise scores in math, reading, and other academic areas (Eisner, 1998). The aim of this article is to examine how students perceive their own experiences with arts education and their perceptions of the impact of arts education on their academic achievement and goals. High school students' perceptions are predicted to be an important element for decision-makers to

consider in the debate about the importance of arts education in the public as well as private school curriculum (Eisner, 1998).

Some studies have shown that school systems that demonstrate high levels of commitment to arts education may have students who are more motivated and more successful in other academic areas (Chapman, 1998). Some studies, such as one done by Forseth (1980), focused on elements of visual arts and not the overall effects of experiences in arts education. These studies did not demonstrate clearly how arts education influences student motivation, cognitive skills, or achievement in other subject areas. Therefore, Forseth concluded that arts activities have no influence on student achievement in subjects such as mathematics. More recent research by Lutifig (1994) showed that arts education has some influence on academic achievement and goals in reading and comprehension skills. However, student perceptions of whether arts education has any influence on their academic achievement or goals were not considered in these studies, primarily because their assessment of themselves was not thought to be a reliable factor.

Recent trends in qualitative research have begun to demonstrate the importance of including student self-reports. For example, according to Scriven (1995), students' ratings of themselves can add value to the input into the curriculum development of a school. This study, in fact, includes student perceptions in examining the importance of arts education and its impact on academic achievement as a way to increase the validity of the study. Building on current research employing student perceptions by Bornholt, Goodnow, and Cooney (1994) and Watt (1995) and by employing the richness of a phenomenological design, the study examines the value of arts education from a new perspective, that of students themselves.

Arts education faces great challenges in this technological age. One is that its continuance in the curriculum is threatened by a lack of knowledge on the part of administrators and policymakers who question the ability of arts education to positively influence student development, achievement, and success. Lawmakers and some school officials debate whether arts education is a necessary component of the school curriculum or whether it would be better to direct present funding for arts education toward core subjects such as mathematics and science. This research study examined the benefits of

arts education and its effects on academic achievement that are perceived by students as beneficial to their educational opportunities and success.

According to Stapleton (1998), economic factors and reform movements frequently advocate the elimination of arts programs in schools. Stapleton also stated that these movements adversely effect arts education as well as individual educational systems and hinder the committing of funds for their support. He advocates that if academic achievement is based on short-term goals rather than long-term growth and development, the process erodes commitment to arts education, diminishes the possibility of successful impact on student achievement, and weakens empowerment of arts education programs. Eisner (1998) predicted that, based on these conclusions, school systems need to rethink student academic success and student input on their own assessment and adapt these educational trends into their students' experiences. According to Eisner, some studies demonstrate that arts education in schools could enable students to develop stronger values, motivational influences, and increase academic success. Because educational philosophy has broadened, and some educators are becoming more aware and sensitized to the importance of arts education, commitment to programs in arts education requires the development of a global perspective which involves examining the arts curricula of other countries and analyzing the connection of these programs to student achievement (Eisner, 1998).

Many countries are restructuring for the future and are adopting arts education as part of their core curricula. Sweden, for example, has redesigned its arts program as an essential component for developing student wellbeing (Lindstrom, 1997). Another country that incorporates the arts in its curricula is Japan, which emphasizes craftsmanship in school to cultivate excellence in the workplace. Teaching expressive arts in the schools, particularly at the elementary level, enables the Japanese society to develop greater tolerance, problem-solving skills, and an appreciation for aesthetics, creativity, and decision-making in its students (Lindstrom, 1997). The Japanese Ministry of Education published guidelines for kindergarten education that state that the goal for kindergarten education is the natural development of the child and that teachers could help children grow through the use of expressive arts (Kamii & Lewis, 1992).

Recently, American public school systems have begun to formulate their own views of the meaning of arts education in the core curriculum as a result of observing a lack of critical and creative thinking skills in students. America education system has begun to look more carefully at the value of structured programs in arts education with student assessment for preschool children and has adopted Sweden's belief that arts education develops cognitive ability (Kamii & Lewis, 1992, p. 85).

The study of student perceptions about arts education and its importance to their academic achievement and goals is timely and important. Goal 2000, initiated by the Clinton administration, seemed to incorporate arts education (humanities, fine arts) and its own assessment methods into the core curriculum (Hatfield, 1999). However, the Bush administration seeks to educate all children proficiently by introducing the No Child Left Behind Act which changes school accountability. This alteration could cause a radical change in the ways school educators and administrators evaluate arts education with respect to student achievement and goals. In the past, there was little need to examine the relationship between arts education and core subjects (Mahlmann, 1999). Today, according to Mahlmann, because of the poor performance of students in critical-thinking skills, low test scores in general, and the diversity of the student population, arts education has become a means of correcting this deficit.

The arts, in general, speak the language of all cultures, which is an advantage in our increasingly more interconnected modern world. Some studies of arts education and academic achievement examined two areas of concern: (a) how useful education in the arts is in general, and (b) how useful arts education is to student development (Mahlmann, 1999). No studies have yet addressed the issue of student perceptions of arts education and its importance from their point of view to academic achievement and goals (p. 3).

According to theorists such as Erikson (1968), high school students in the developmental stage of adolescence are capable of beginning to understand themselves and come up with their own theories of influences, self success, and identity (or sense of self). Concepts such as self-understanding and critical thinking develop during adolescence. The study built on these developing abilities of high school students to engage in self-evaluation and reflection. Arts educators have began infusing the

development of critical thinking skills into lesson plans through self-observation and analysis (Whitmire, 1996). They collaborate with classroom teachers in integrating arts education with math, history, social studies, and English. By focusing on students who have engaged in arts education throughout their school years and who are in the developmental stage of adolescence, the self-reports examined in this study reveal meaningful, new information about the importance of arts education. A relationship exists among the state of funding, arts education, academic achievement.

### *Transferability and Arts Education*

John Dewey (1900, 1902, 1934) stated that art is related to intelligence; therefore, the arts should be integrated into education. He believed that "arts education is a process that yields first experience, then a product. The experiences comprise interactions with the environment and nature, involve stability and order, and produce through rhythms and patterns orderly changes with balance and counterbalance" (p. 18). The results, according to Tureski (1987), can lead to "an experience characterized by completeness, meaning that the problem can be solved and thus yielding a sense of fulfillment" (p. 19).

Creating an environment that supports children's mental imagery is essential to heightening sensory awareness, sharpening children's representational abilities, and nurturing meaning-making (Galda & Cullinan, 1993, p. 308). For example, using stories and journal writing and integrating the visual arts and music into these writings can inspire creative thoughts. Using written responses to a painting or drawing, or analysis and aesthetics, children develop critical abilities because they become more aware of what they hear and see and feel (Galda & Cullinan, 1993, pp. 308-309) and being an astute observer is a precursor to being a capable problem-solver.

Read (1967), like Dewey, supported the arts in education. He believed the arts permeate every aspect of our environment. He gave three major reasons for this theory: (a) Children have an innate need to communicate and express feelings, (b) through observation children need to record their sense of expression, and (c) children will learn to appreciate and interpret other expressions in their environment (Read, 1967, p. 21).

According to Galda and Cullinan (1993), creating an artistic environment that supports divergent thinking and problem solving also plays a role in cultivating children's

ability to reflect and think through their world (p. 226). For example, using clay to create an art object and critiquing it to explain how and why it was made enables children to focus on a problem-solving process through manipulation. This hand-building process enables the child to make stylistic choices as well as aesthetic ones. "When children use play, art, or music to articulate their understanding, they are exploring opportunities to think about subject matter in an exciting way" (p. 226). Arts education facilitates thinking in a critical way during this important developmental stage of a child's life and creates a foundation upon which the child continually builds, one which generalizes to other academic and social areas.

If an atmosphere of discovery is created within their environment during arts instruction, children develop a sense of appreciation, inquiry, heightened observation, and responsiveness. Exhibiting children's art (in whatever form) encourages them to scrutinize and critically observe art, which generates appreciation and also self-scrutiny (Gandini, 1993). If arts education accomplishes these aims, arts education should be made fundamental in the primary-level curriculum so as to instill higher-order thinking skills early in a child's development

### *Significance of Studying Art*

Art provides another way to represent, interpret, and convey our world. It employs a multiplicity of symbol systems to provide a more complete picture and a more comprehensive education (Fowler, 1994, p. 5-6). In other words, mathematics, science, and English, which form the core curriculum in schools, can be assumed to represent only part of the education process, requiring other kinds of subjects to create a balance for students. The reason for the present study was to find out whether students in courses in arts education perceived themselves as benefiting academically from their experiences. If arts education is perceived as contributing to academic success (or acquiring skills), this supports its educational worth (Eisner, 1998, p. 5).

According to Hatfield (1999), the future of arts education depends on recognizing it as a vital aspect of the school curriculum and appreciating its impact on student cognitive development, motor skills, and creativity. The continuance of arts education may be supported by student self-assessments, particularly when coupled with earlier

quantitative research findings and the professional viewpoints of qualified teachers. These teachers must be cognizant of new standards and able to adjust as arts education redefines its relevance to student achievement and goals (Hatfield, 1999, p. 6). Student input (when they are provided the opportunity to reflect on their perceptions and experiences) can join with the input of policymakers and administrators as decisions are made about the importance of arts education in the school curriculum and student involvement in making decisions.

Educators around the world have become more aware of the importance of arts education on the academic achievement of students. In general, technology and globalization are the driving forces behind the restructuring of schools and curricula, and arts education in particular, not only across America, but also in other industrialized countries. The educational system demands that teachers instill critical thinking skills in their students.

Factors integral to arts education and its impact on student achievement may influence policymakers to seek alternative means of school reform. Child development theories, particularly those focused on cognitive development; provide a framework for examining the potential impact of arts education on student achievement. The development of critical thinking skills is related to a child's cognitive development (Gardner, 1993, p. 86). According to Green (1999), teaching methods that encourage students to confront societal values and beliefs require critical thinking strategies that compel students to define complex issues, analyze data, identify assumptions, infer solutions, apply the acquired information through an art-making process, and finally to conceptualize new forms of evaluation (p. 80). Critical thinking skills develop through both the teacher and the learner. Teachers have to become critical thinkers themselves before they can impart such knowledge to students (Sternberg, 1987, p. 456). If students can reflect on their experiences with arts education, it is important to know what thinking skills arts education develops, how this development is experienced by the student, and what functions these thinking skills may serve in achieving academic accomplishments across the curriculum.

Some research findings on arts education and its impact, as perceived by students, shows that arts education affects their creativity and is viewed as important in the

development of their thinking skills. Some students thought that arts education is sometimes considered an activity to fill gaps when necessary for relaxation at the elementary level. "Some parents were not as interested in arts education or knowing about arts education in their child's school," responded one of the students, "but there are some parents who feel unless there is arts education in a school, the school has limited values towards education in general. Therefore, they seek out schools that have arts education programs.

In the literature, there are supporting claims for the importance of arts education in assisting students with subject content, qualities of experience, conceptual structuring of ways of life, depth of participation, and forms of subjective reasoning that cannot be obtained through other subjects. (Clark & Zimmerman, 1978; Chapman, 1978; Eisner, 1972). This claim has inherent value in arts education experiences such as transferability of skills learned from one subject to another according to students' self-assessments.

Arts education is widely perceived as nonacademic, fun, idiosyncratic, unrelated to life, and as having little civic or educational importance. These perceptions have made it difficult to rationalize arts education as a civic investment and as an educational issue. This observation about arts education shows a major aspect of the context in which arts education policies and programs have developed in the last century.

The impact of technology on arts education has also been felt by the art world. Computers can simplify the experiences, but the importance on access to arts education as an emerging medium has not diminished in the world at large, especially through the eyes of arts educators. Policymakers are beginning to see the importance of arts education and arts education experiences as something useful and important. This can be realized when arts education is drawn into the essential school curriculum as a distinct discipline.

### *Summary*

Arts education is important to human development and to the social and economic health of a nation (Pitman, 1998; Schacter, 1996). The demonstrated importance of arts education and the lack of research on this topic make this topic important because it suggests that students value arts education and believe it should be incorporated into school programs, not just in few schools where administrators feel it is important. This new knowledge will help administrators, teachers, and policymakers select and implement effective arts education programs (discipline-based arts program) for schools. Most importantly, the topic provided a description of students' self-reports both in school and as it relates to their lives. It shows that students believe their lives are affected positively by arts education and feel that teachers can contribute to their development while analyzing their own beliefs and teaching practices to encourage the inclusion of arts education in the curriculum.

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