

The Benefits of Art Education

part of our Parent Education Literature Series

by Keith Seidel, Ph.D.



Arts education benefits the student because it cultivates the whole child, gradually building many kinds of literacy while developing intuition, reasoning, imagination, and dexterity into unique forms of expression and communication. This process requires not merely an active mind but a trained one. An education in the arts benefits society because students of the arts gain powerful tools for understanding human experiences, both past and present. They learn to respect the often very different ways others have of thinking, working, and expressing themselves. They learn to make decisions in situations where there are no standard answers. By studying the arts, students stimulate their natural creativity and learn to develop it to meet the needs of a complex and competitive society. And, as study and competence in the arts reinforce one another, the joy of learning becomes real, tangible, and powerful.

Basic Abilities

Substantial evidence: There is evidence that working with the arts, especially in grades kindergarten through seven, develops students' minds and bodies in ways that enable them to learn better. The arts, particularly music, dance, and visual art, develop neural connections and body/ brain connections which further learning in many areas, including math,

reading, writing, and general language development. Having students work with creative drama and theatre in these earlier grades gives them a great advantage in their capacity for developing language skills, reading, writing, and verbal, and interpersonal skills. And all of the arts help

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students develop emotionally and socially, so that they are more prepared to deal with school, life, and other people. The arts represent ways of knowing and interacting with the world around us. They let us experiment with new ways of thinking and doing, and encourage us to stretch our limits and develop our minds, bodies, and emotions.

Ways and means

Substantial evidence: All of the arts are effective in keeping kids in school, in reaching students at risk and students with distinctive learning styles, and in helping to develop a more disciplined educational

environment in which students' energies are directed at learning and creating. The arts not only make education more interesting, they literally make learning accessible to many students for the first time. The arts also help students develop key 'habits of mind' that include creativity, critical thinking, the ability to pose and solve problems, self discipline, and self confidence. These skills are necessary for success in the arts and, once learned, can translate to success in other areas of school and life.

Other evidence: There is other recent research to indicate that the arts teach students to become self-motivated learners and to use time and other resources effectively - important skills in school and business.

Knowledge and skills

Substantial evidence: The arts themselves are important for students to understand. We are surrounded by arts - almost nothing is created or communicated without their influence, and we are influenced continuously by music, art, drama and dramatic media, dance and movement. And there is evi-

dence that when the arts are connected in meaningful ways with other subject areas, students comprehend and retain more about the subjects in-

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involved. Arts programmes have been quite effective in teaching math, science, reading, writing, general language development, history, and social studies.

Other evidence: In addition, there are numerous good examples of how the arts have aided in the teaching of other languages, including English as a foreign language; and how the arts assist teachers in more effectively reaching students with disabilities and learning disorders.

Working and connecting

Substantial evidence: The arts are the voice and the record of a people. What we know about past cultures, we

learn chiefly from the arts that they leave behind. It is not surprising, then, to discover that the arts are very good at teaching students many skills which they need in order to live and work in a society. Interpersonal skills; the ability to work in teams; an understanding, tolerance, and even appreciation for diversity in people and ideas; and the ability to lead and communicate effectively with groups are all strengthened through participation in the arts.

Make the arts part of a quality education

Our review of research and arts programmes strongly supports the need to include dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts in education for all students. It seems clear that sustained, carefully planned programmes in the arts are quite effective in preparing children to succeed in school, work, and life. Particularly strong are those programs which:

- are school based
- have a sequential curriculum in the arts
- include school arts specialists
- include community artists and arts organizations
- include a clear assessment component, and
- connect the arts with other subject areas in the school

The research tells us what the arts can do. Hundreds of well documented school and community arts programmes around the nation tell us how we can make the arts a valuable part of education for all students. Our commitment is all that is necessary to enlist the arts to help lead our children to success.

Keith Seidel is Assistant Professor and Director of Educational Leadership Graduate Programs at the Center for the Study of Leadership in Urban Schools. He is Executive Director for the Alliance for Curriculum Reform and is a Principal Investigator for the Teacher Quality Partnership, a state-wide, longitudinal study of teacher preparation. He was editor and author for the book *Assessing Student Learning: A Practical Guide*, used in thousands of schools nationally, and has written on program evaluation and assessment for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the national journal *Teaching Theatre*, the *New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching & Learning*, and *Arts Education Policy Review*. He was one of six authors primarily responsible for the development of the national K12 standards for theatre, and has been actively involved with the national standards-based reform movement in all content areas since 1990.

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