

An Arts Education: A Necessary Component to Building the Whole Child

by Deborah D. West, guest editor



Art by Blake Cordell
Rock Springs Elementary School

As an art educator, I am always bothered when I hear the question “Is an arts education important to all children?” The question arises frequently in the public schools across our nation. The answer being heard—finally as well as frequently—is Yes! An arts education is a necessary component to building the whole child. “If a child is not given a chance to participate in the arts—be it movement, drawing or music—we are taking away another language that he has,” says Jeanne Pond, executive director of the Abington

Deborah D. West is an art educator at Rock Springs Elementary School in Lawrenceville, Georgia.

Art Center in Pennsylvania. She has observed that preschool children can draw a giraffe better than they can describe one with words. The purpose of this issue of *HORIZONS* is to share research and evidence which prove that the arts are necessary for all children. The correlation between the arts and the other educational disciplines can only enhance the entire educational process. Reading, writing, arithmetic, and arts—the four r’s working together can prevail!

Teaching the arts is much more than just having students paint a pretty picture or make nice-sounding noises. Art education is much more than the production of nice things. We, the fine arts teachers, are teaching problem-solving skills daily. When we teach color theory, we are teaching something that students will take with them and use throughout their lives. Art education expands our creative, perceptive, interpretive, and analytical intelligence.

The arts teach other disciplines—just as math teachers use beans to teach math and English teachers use books to teach the language arts. The visual art teacher uses many tools—oil pastels, watercolors, and collage, not to mention slides and prints and music—to teach appreciation, criticism, and history, as well as production. We are, in essence, creating well-rounded citizens who appreciate and use the arts to enhance their lives.

The critical study of visual art gives the student a sensitivity to and understanding of the beliefs and ideas that are the cultural foundation of all humanity. There has never been a culture or society that did not create some form of art. Great cultures have flourished without a written language, but never without art. Art truly is the international language which documents our history.

There now exists a solid research base proving that an arts education is essential to educational attainment. Test scores are rising and schools are producing more creative graduates, students who can see outside of the box.

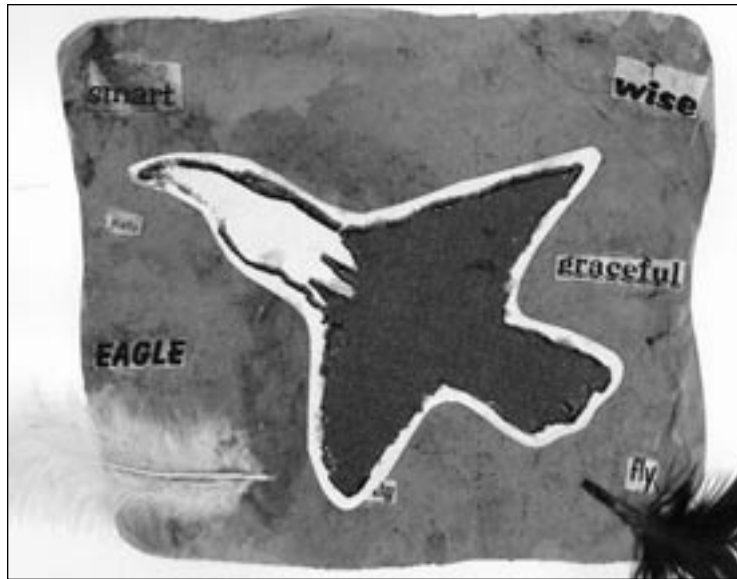
- Eric Oddleifson (1989) states that “a curriculum that devotes 25 percent or more of the school day to the arts produces youngsters with academically superior abilities.” According to Elliot Eisner, “Work in the arts develops unique and important mental skills and represents the highest of human achievements to which students would have access” (1993, p. 7). Eisner explains that schools continually ignore the arts as part of their whole curriculum even while society regards the arts as among the highest of human achievements. Our society spends billions of dollars on museums and concert halls, while cutting art education budgets across the nation.

- Art education has been recognized as a vital part of a child’s learning experience when introduced to students at a young age. A comprehensive arts education implemented in the curriculum enhances students’ ability to understand concepts and express themselves articulately (Chapman, 1998). According to Jo Alice Leeds (1989) and Arthur P. Efland (1990), it was not until the nineteenth century that children’s drawings were seriously studied for their own merit as art. Today, art education is generally accepted in the field of education, and some researchers have related the importance of the development of children’s drawing abilities to motor development (Clare, 1990).

- Victor Lowenfeld (1947; 1957) described specific stages of growth and development of children based on the marks they made. He asserted that the child would develop naturally if given artistic freedom. His ideas had great impact on the way art was taught to young children. Becky Van Buren (1986) explains that “art experiences can help children learn to explore their inner selves as well as teach them how to discover and develop ideas both in art and reading” (p. 56).

- Art is also an important way for children to express themselves as individuals. In “Art Means Language,” Ann Richardson (1982) describes 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.

The role of the art educator is not only to provide instruction that addresses the affective



Art by Kelly Guess

and cognitive domains in terms of child development, but in response to recent studies, art educators have become concerned with learning styles and multiple intelligences.

- J. Davis and Howard Gardner (1993) view the young child as an artist. They believe that young children possess special gifts, such as heightened senses, that enable them to be intensely aware of their world. Through this awareness, children are able to develop symbols and other modes of expression.

- Gardner (1985) states that we as a society value parts of human intellect over others. He believes there are seven different forms of intelligence, all equally important: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Gardner believes that we deprive children when we address only linguistic and logical-mathematical domains. He, as well as numerous educators, supports the need for curricula and instructional strategies that foster and promote the growth of all seven domains. Unfortunately, as noted by Gardner (1987), the public schools routinely judge a child’s performance by verbal ability, so the child who can “say” more in an artistic drawing than a sentence may be shortchanged by the system.

Many people do not associate the arts with “thinking.” They are aware of the art product—that is, the song, the picture, the play—but they are less aware of the process that creates the product. The arts are not so much a result of inspi-



Art by Angela Matthews

ration and talent as they are of a person's capacities for creative thinking, critical judgment, imagining, problem solving, and numerous other mental processes. "The arts represent forms of cognition every bit as potent as the verbal and logical-mathematical forms of cognition that have been the traditional focus of public education. "If the schools begin to work together to combine the four r's, and truly make learning an interdisciplinary event, the children will benefit greatly" (Oddleifson, 1989, p.46).

It is time to "see" the arts for what they are: an imperative component to building a whole child. Truly, one of the most important benefits of an arts education is the "education of the imagination." Imagination is a powerful tool and if we can imagine something, then we can make it happen. Imagination is an invaluable resource for seeking and finding solutions to problems.

In this issue, Nancy Witherall's article on page 179 discusses Gardner's multiple intelligence theory and brain-compatible learning. It is an in-

depth look at ways in which classroom teachers can implement the arts into their curriculum.

Vanessa Camilleri adds to these insights, beginning on page 184, demonstrating how music helps at-risk children academically and socially. It shows how the arts, by improving children's self-esteem, increases their eagerness to learn in other academic areas.

Robin Mello, on page 190, and Sandra Olsen and her colleagues on page 194, present studies that prove the arts are working.

Just imagine what the students of tomorrow will create when they have a comprehensive arts education throughout their schooling. Imagine students actively becoming a part of their education, teaching the disciplines through a hands-on approach.

The teachers of America can join forces to make this a reality, to make the arts connection! Visual art, music, dance and drama—the creative processes at work will truly change the way our future thinks, learns, and solves problems. Indeed, an arts education is a necessary component to building the whole child, and it's a right, not a privilege, for *all* children to have an arts education from kindergarten through high school.

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