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Learning in the Arts and
Student Academic and Social Development



Essay:

Promising Signs of Positive Effects: Lessons from the Multi-Arts Studies

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The selection of multi-arts studies collected in this Compendium is diverse, in terms of both the arts learning experiences they describe and the particularities of the research they report. These selections explore learning in multiple art forms and in contexts that range from whole-school and school district renewal efforts to community-based arts programs to arts integration efforts in individual elementary school classrooms. This body of work includes studies that look closely at what happens in a small sample of classrooms, as well as studies conducted on a national level. They include a range of approaches from correlational to ethnographic. Some were designed as basic research on the impact of the arts on children's learning or school change, while others are evaluations of particular programs.

While each study includes particular variables related to their specific context, as a collective they fundamentally share a focus on: (1) describing the processes, contexts, and environments that promote or support arts learning, and (2) documenting the impact of arts learning on other kinds of learning (however those "other kinds" of learning may be defined or measured). It is these central questions about process and context, outcomes, and transfer that are critical to the identification and refinement of a research agenda that will establish the future role of the arts in education.

Three Critical Issues

Certainly, the attempt to understand the effect of multiple-arts experiences on children's learning is a daunting task. Researchers have taken up this challenge in various ways, with designs ranging from meta-analyses of quantitative studies through ethnographic approaches. Several of these approaches are represented in this collection. While researchers may and should debate the merits of particular lines of inquiry, other issues fundamental to both arts learning and arts research loom. First, what is the nature of the arts learning experience, and if we can sufficiently understand it, how are we to capture or measure it? Second, are the learning disciplines of art, music, dance, and drama similar enough to each other to merit being grouped together as "arts education," or are we better off dissecting each discipline separately? And finally, what kinds of outcomes should we expect as a result of arts learning, or, put another way, how do the arts contribute to human development?

Let's put aside the first two questions for the moment, and turn to the third. (Debating the nature of arts learning is an eternal challenge!) Researchers investigating outcomes of arts learning often make a fundamental choice: are they to focus on specific academic skills, such as those reflected in standardized measures of reading or math, or do they look towards broader, more general capacities of the mind, self-perceptions, and social relationships?

The collection of work presented here offers progress in both areas, the specific and the general. Catterall's research provides significant evidence of a link between arts participation and improved academic performance, as measured by test scores in specific academic subjects. As researchers continue to discuss the causal implications of this work, they should note the remarkable similarity of findings across this set of studies—by researchers working independently—within general cognitive, personal, and social domains of learning. For instance, Catterall, Harland, and the Teachers College group all found that drama experiences develop a sense of empathy for others, Harland's findings on creativity, expressive skills, and self-confidence are remarkably consistent with the Teachers College (TC) findings, as well as Catterall's work. Positive risk-taking, as an outcome of arts experiences, emerged independently in the work of Heath, Baum, and TC. The self-regulatory behaviors described by Baum are similarly described in other studies, but by other names. (Baum's definitions of "paying attention," "self-initiating" behaviors, and "persevering" have natural counterparts in TC's "focused perception," "task persistence," and "ownership of learning.")

The SCANS workforce skills cited by Catterall in his CAPE evaluation also reflect similar cognitive and social capacities worthy of continued investigation, such as motivation, decision-making, creative thinking, and speaking skills.

Therefore, this research indicates collective progress in the search for identifying outcomes of arts education beyond skills within the arts disciplines themselves. General capacities of the mind, social competencies, and personal dispositions developed through arts learning may have wide application in a variety of academic and life experiences. There are ample opportunities here for researchers to build upon this work. Researchers, and those who fund them, should consider that the habits of mind and personal dispositions explored in this collection are

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closer to the "true" work of the arts educator than those basic competency skills measured by standardized reading and math tests. There is evidence here, for instance, of drama experiences supporting the development of self-confidence, positive risk-taking, and empathy for others—valuable and desirable outcomes, but unlikely to be measured in a pencil-and-paper exam.

Whatever the merits of high-stakes testing for improving basic verbal and math skills, there can be little doubt that results from these tests have been misapplied to other educational concerns,¹ a prominent example being the use of student test results as a proxy for teacher quality. This misapplication has led to school environments where "what gets tested gets taught," a subsequent narrowing of curriculum, and a limiting of the quality of learning opportunities for young people.² Innovative arts programs are sometimes thought to be at risk unless they demonstrate their value within the standards-and-accountability calculus. It is doubtful, though, that researchers will be able to successfully employ high-stakes testing results as credible outcomes of arts programs except in those instances where program activities are clearly intended to achieve results that can appropriately be measured by such tests. Even then the limitations of traditional standardized testing would prohibit the documentation of critical and broadly transferable arts outcomes. The positive cognitive, personal, and social outcomes emerging from this collected research represent capacities central to the goals society typically articulates for public education—productive social membership, critical and higher-order thinking, and commitment to the skills for lifelong learning.

Despite the promising findings on outcomes presented here, more progress is needed to address the first two issues we identified at the outset of this essay. As a field, we still can't identify, define, and measure the collective multiple or integrated arts learning experience very well. Because of this, most arts transfer studies measure participation in arts classes as a surrogate for assessing arts learning, but then measure learning outcomes directly, be they creativity, self-concept, or math performance. Transfer studies in arts education will always be somewhat insufficient until we can more effectively measure arts learning. The quality of arts programs should be considered, as well. We can't predict a transfer outcome unless we are first confident that there is a properly defined causal event: in this case, arts learning.

Researchers should also continue to develop better and more creative research designs, considering the complexity and richness of the arts experience in schools. Is the answer to be found in better-controlled experimental studies, as some have suggested?³ Perhaps not yet, at least until we can better define the arts learning process. Systematic, well-designed qualitative studies can help us understand what the arts learning experience is for children, and what characteristics of that experience are likely to travel across domains of learning. Such research can also help us develop appropriate forms of measurement—assessments that reflect the rich nature of arts learning experiences and the complexities of arts learning outcomes. In the future, researchers can develop and validate measures based upon solid qualitative work.

Describing Processes and Environments

Clearly, qualitative research is needed to build rich, meaningful descriptions of the processes and environments that promote arts learning. Exploring the processes of arts learning means looking at both arts teaching and learning, simultaneously and separately, as both method and means. Effective teaching processes identified in this body of research include "hands-on involvement to promote on-task behavior," "individualized instruction coupled with positive reinforcement," "recognition for creative accomplishment," "genuine and personal interest in students," and "maintaining and communicating high standards and expectations," all of which are characteristics of quality teaching regardless of the discipline being taught. Characteristics of more constructivist and learner-centered approaches to teaching are also present in descriptions of arts learning contexts. The relevancy of activities, respectful climate, and opportunities for learners to take responsibility that are cited in a number of these studies as providing a context for learner risk-taking and increased motivation and engagement are indicative of these approaches.

These studies, examined collectively, suggest that these desirable processes and teaching characteristics are inherent to dynamic, multiple-arts teaching environments. Although these qualities may be desirable in other academic contexts, their frequency across this set of studies is striking. Multiple and integrated arts learning environments may inherently provide teachers with varied opportunities to develop and exercise the positive strategies outlined in these evaluation and research studies. There is need for additional research to better delineate the characteristics of multiple and integrated arts programs that can lead to a broader impact on learning and schools. Likewise, researchers need to be on guard when designing inquiries that compare arts programs with

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- 1 Wasserman, S. Quantum theory, the uncertainty principle, and the alchemy of standardized testing. *Phi Delta Kappan*, (September 2001), 28-40.
- 2 Eisner, E. W. What does it mean to say a school is doing well? *Phi Delta Kappan*, (January 2001) 367-372.
- 3 Eisner, E. W. (1998). Does experience in the arts boost academic achievement? *Art Education*, 51 (1), 7-15. Wasser, E., Hittand, J. (2009). The arts in education: Weighing the evidence for a causal link. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 34 (3-4), 3-10.

desirable pedagogical approaches to programs devoid of both the arts and good teaching. Otherwise, we will merely demonstrate the value of sound teaching practice, and not the arts.

Characteristics of effective arts learning environments, as reported in the larger-scale evaluations such as the NFER study conducted in Great Britain, include standards and expectations that focus on the value of the arts, accessible and adequate offerings in all art forms, and sufficient resources to support quality arts experiences, such as supplies, equipment, and, most important, qualified teachers. Again, these kinds of characteristics are generic to effective learning environments, regardless of the core focus of the curriculum. Seaman's *The Arts in the Basic Curriculum Project: Looking to the Past and Preparing for the Future* provides insight into how schools and school districts that have viable arts programs differ from other schools and districts. In these evaluations, similarities in environmental factors emerge—including a shared understanding of, and commitment to, the importance of the arts across the larger school community, administrative support, adequate materials and space, adequate and additional funding, district support, parent support, and networking among educators and members of the arts community. These factors reflect differences in school culture and climate. Studies that systematically describe the change process as schools adopt an arts focus, integrate the arts across the curriculum, make the arts accessible to all students, invite the arts community into the educational process, and make quality arts teaching a valued activity can contribute to the broader national conversation about school renewal.

Documenting Impact and Transfer

The multi-arts selections include studies designed and implemented as evaluations of arts education initiatives, studies that explore arts involvement as a mediating factor in the lives and learning of "at-risk" youth, and studies designed to investigate the relationship between arts involvement and general academic achievement, both broadly and narrowly defined. There are positive findings collected here with implications for curriculum, professional development, partnership, and learning. Administrators and policy-makers can be secure in supporting strong arts programs based upon the evidence presented here.

Researchers, however, should be less secure in resting on their laurels. Questions remain, indicating the need for much work ahead. For example, as researchers we must take the issues of *quality* and *quantity* of arts programs head-on. How "good" (or effective) are the programs we are evaluating or researching? How "good" is "good enough" for us to track teaching and learning from one domain to another?

In the same vein, how much arts is enough arts? Is there a tipping point, below which an arts program will have little extrinsic effects, but beyond which these programs have significant impact on children, teachers, and schools? Administrators and policy-makers would welcome our answers to these questions. As researchers we need better answers in order to design better studies.

We also should pursue more precise identification, definition, and measurement in three areas: (1) arts learning; (2) outcomes of arts learning, including cognitive and social competencies, and personal dispositions; and (3) characteristics of the contexts, processes, and environments of arts teaching and learning. But assuming we can improve measurement in these areas, what then? We need to develop better models for understanding how learning within artistic domains interacts with learning in other disciplines. Are we to think of the relationship of arts and other learning as parallel, symbiotic, interactive, or multi-layered? It is overly simplistic to assume that learning in one complex domain (such as the arts) can be sufficiently isolated within a school context and then be shown to affect other subjects in a linear fashion without regard to the context of schools, families, culture, and the nature of the learning process itself. The directionality of transfer effects must be explored, as we try and understand how learning in one discipline influences learning in others.

Issues of equity also should be addressed. Future research should examine the paths by which young people come to "live and learn" in the arts—and how some are systematically excluded. How is access to the arts mediated by race and class, both in terms of school and community offerings and in terms of who self-selects to participate? Work done in this area looking at youth categorized as "at risk" points to arts learning experiences as a powerful factor for influencing personal, social, and intellectual development. Research should be focused on the identification of the barriers to access, while more clearly articulating the process of how the arts might intervene on behalf of learning.

In closing, this selection of multi-arts studies provides direction for building quality arts learning experiences and for the design of future research efforts aimed at documenting the unique impact of arts learning—both learning that enhances the artistic endeavor and learning that transfers to other disciplines and other contexts. The challenge is to follow through and use what this work tells us to garner support from funding agents, policy-makers, educators, and the public for the design and implementation of quality arts programs and a relevant research agenda.