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Humanities

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Using Fine Arts to Make Finer Students

The heart of creativity, collaboration, and listening in the American public school system is quickly fading. Fine arts - sometimes referred to as “the arts” - are defined as a program that includes visual arts, drama, music, and/or dance. The arts, as described in the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* and the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, are a “core academic subject” and are a part of a “well-rounded education,” meaning one that is broad and rich in content (Franklin). In spite of this, many schools continue to waive the requirement of fine arts for graduation and, in some instances, dismantle their arts programs altogether. Why is this the case, you might ask? The main issues that schools cite are their view of fine arts as a peripheral education and its lack of standardized testing. While education in fine arts is often one of the first things to be defunded in schools, it should have an increased emphasis because of its ability to introduce new perspectives to students and prepare them for their post-educational lives.

In essence, curriculum developers mainly view the arts as a peripheral subject, similar to how one may view a club or sport. In 2018, a mere twenty-five states required fine arts credit to graduate, with an additional three states having locally determined credit requirements that could easily eliminate the requirements for a fine arts education (National Center for Education Statistics). This means that 50% of the United States neglects to recognize fine arts education as an indispensable part of the curriculum despite its designation as a core subject by the Federal government. Furthermore, it is important to note that fine arts education places considerable

emphasis on fostering creative thinking and freedom of expression, subsequently resulting in a lack of standardized testing. The problem then turns into administrators contending with the challenge of assessing the significance of arts education and monitoring students' progress. Due to the stress placed on standardized testing, exemplified by state-mandated tests like MCAS or national tests like the SATs, schools rely on these metrics as a benchmark for student comprehension or even the effectiveness of a particular subject. As fine arts do not align with this test-based environment, schools view the subject as unnecessary. The problem is that schools prioritize curricula that they believe will equip students for their futures, often diverging from what is genuinely conducive to their future success.

However, an education should not be determined by test scores or teaching to a test; it should be well-rounded and prepare students for any possible future. Education in the fine arts teaches students critical skills that will be important in their later years, no matter the subject that they pursue. Additionally, any teacher would quickly be able to point out how many students turn to listening to music or drawing as a distraction from what work they may have, when in reality, they are yearning for the freedom to express themselves. Drawing specifically is “superior” to other activities such as reading and writing because it forces students to “process information in multiple ways” (Terada). Education in the fine arts allows students to articulate themselves in a creative manner they may not otherwise be able to do, a skill that no other subject can teach. That being said, why is the current view on fine arts education a problem? Why should schools emphasize an education in the arts? While education in the fine arts does not occur as much as it should, it provides many benefits that are currently not utilized.

To begin, fine arts education teaches students critical skills that will be involved in their future lives in the professional world. As previously mentioned, education in the arts promotes

creative thinking and problem-solving. In addition, it also promotes confidence, perseverance, focus, non-verbal communication, receiving constructive feedback, collaboration, dedication, and accountability (Strauss). Some of these skills may not be ones that are commonly thought of as a result of arts education, but they are still very applicable. For example, focus is a large cornerstone of ensemble learning in music classes. Focusing on many aspects at once, like how your sound fits in with others, staying on time, and having a good sound quality yourself, forces students to be able to think critically about themselves and their relation to others while still remaining aware of other things around them. In addition, music and dance education teaches students to perform well under pressure. This skill, easily learned through the arts, is essential for any career involving critical performance skills, such as doctors and lawyers. Contrary to having students take tests under pressure, performing under pressure requires immense concentration and physical control, something that a test cannot require. A majority of these skills can be applied to any subject outside of the arts, and often, in students' professional lives, the skills they learn from fine arts education are highly sought after.

While these skills are extremely important, an important transition from high school to a student's professional life is college. A common way of measuring the success of a high schooler is what college they get into, usually correlating the Ivy League schools with the highest success. However, it is important to note that not all students attend colleges in their post-high school life, but these students will still receive immense benefits from an education in the fine arts, as identified above. All eight of the Ivy League schools are liberal arts schools, meaning students are required to take a range of courses - including fine arts - in order to "read critically, write cogently and think broadly" (The Trustees of Princeton University). This speaks for itself that the highest-level education in the United States includes fine arts education, and for good reason -

students who are more involved in the fine arts early on will find more opportunities for them in the professional world. Requiring students to be educated in the arts aids them in developing important skills that many companies search for in candidates, and when more schools adopt these policies, student success will be higher as a result.

A main component of these 'elite' institutions is their emphasis on the broad coursework students must take to get a full educational experience; therefore, fine arts education must be implemented or intertwined into many other subjects to be truly effective. Arts integration is a specific curriculum designed toward "reaching and teaching every child" and includes numerous benefits (Riley). Not only does it foster additional creative thinking skills, it results in students becoming increasingly active participants in their learning and creates a more equitable learning environment by allowing students to understand material in their own unique way. For example, in an English class, students could act out a play, paying particular attention to diction and how the author may have chosen words to convey meaning. To continue this example, the Massachusetts Academy of Math and Science at WPI, the nation's third top public high school, requires students to read *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau and then create and perform plays relating to some part of the book. The use of arts enhances students' understanding of the book content and the author.

In addition, the arts can also have other subjects implemented within them. History is a very common example, where in an art class, students may study the history behind a famous painting, the artist behind a particular piece of art, or even political cartoons. In music classes, students may take an entire course about the history of music and how it has evolved through the centuries. Math also has a heavy relationship with the arts, particularly with music. Students learn to focus on counting from the beginning of music education, and it continues getting more

complicated as they continue. However, as it gets more intricate, students learn more about the math behind the music and, as a result, understand more about math in general. Studies have also shown that music uses the same “pathways we use for spatial reasoning,” mainly improving math-based thinking (Bales). This further proves that education in the arts can improve students' aptitude in other subjects, making them not just better students but more well-rounded individuals.

Lastly, fine arts education allows students to explore new perspectives, which leads to increased empathy and social awareness. The arts have a creative nature, giving rise to differing opinions in students. Thus, when students share their opinions and creations, it forces them to look at the same topic from different points of view and puts into question their own views. In addition, viewing other pieces or works of art allows students to understand the feelings of others and creates an emotional response in viewers, further increasing empathy, and therefore social awareness. Furthermore, when creating any form of art, students must use their emotions to enhance their performance or meaning. To do this successfully, students must be “in touch” with their emotions and feelings (Chiaro). This causes students to be more likely to recognize and understand the feelings of others, thus increasing empathy.

Nonetheless, why is building empathy in students so important? Many skills that students will use in their professional lives, most of them a result of arts education, develop through empathy. Once students have developed empathy, which can easily be enhanced by education in the fine arts, they are better equipped to collaborate with others using those skills. As students are more sensitive to the emotions of others, they are more likely to exude patience and listen to those around them more effectively, as if they were musicians within a band or orchestra. Empathy allows students to collaborate more with others, and their ability to work well with

others is enhanced to the degree that is almost impossible without the help of fine arts education. As the arts essentially teach students to think in different “mediums,” they are more prepared to engage in the “complexities of contemporary life” (Tamer).

While fine arts education should be a major component of every student’s educational experience, inequities in the field outweigh many of its benefits. Minorities - mainly Black and Hispanic - earn an average between “30 and 25 percent fewer arts credits” when compared to their white counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics). While this may not seem like a lot, this could equate to an art class per year in a student’s entire high school career. Fine arts education promotes growth in so many areas of students, so for these inequities to exist within programs is detrimental to its success. In order to alleviate this issue, it is of the utmost importance that all members of the community support art programs in order for them to truly reach all students.

In conclusion, many arts programs cost a lot of funding for upkeep and materials, and without constant and sufficient support, these programs will reach a smaller number of students and possibly collapse altogether. Due to this fact, fine arts education must have a large emphasis in all schools, particularly in schools that historically have a low enrollment rate in the arts, no matter the reason. With the support from all community members, regardless of their involvement with the educational system, these programs can flourish and extend their reach to all students, providing them with skills they otherwise would not be able to obtain. After all, the future belongs to people with an education and an imagination to create.

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