Critical Thinking Assignment

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12 May, 2014

**The Case for Art Education**

Education is on the forefront of many people’s minds when it comes to paramount issues in our society. Worries about dropout rates, the achievement gap, and lack of motivation in students permeate the thoughts of those who care about education. Among countless tactics to try and reform schools, a strong art education in areas like visual arts, music, theater, writing, and dance stands out as a winning tool that can make change. Schools can utilize art to help raise scores in reading and math, raise student engagement in school, improve school culture, and help nurture students into become well adjusted people who are better able to lead fulfilling lives. Through education in the arts themselves, as well as promoting arts integration into other subject areas, schools can help raise a generation that is ready to meet the challenges of our modern world.

 When it comes to mindsets about art and education, many people take a stance that seems to ask what good an art education can do in correlation to other parts of the curriculum, wondering what value art has in relation to boosting proficiency in subject areas like math and reading. Many resources and a great deal of time have been put into answering these questions, with a large amount of resulting evidence that points to arts-rich educational environments leading to higher scores in math and reading testing. Comparing the SAT scores of students with a large amount of arts exposure to those who have little to none can reveal concrete evidence that art makes an impact. Those with training in the arts generally tend to have higher math and verbal scores on the SAT. The average differences are significant, with almost 50 points gained from arts education in the verbal portion and about 30 in math. The findings of research into the SAT also make it clear that the correlation is linear- the more art classes one takes, the higher the scores will be (Critical Evidence 9).

One study that shows correlation between arts involvement and higher testing scores in other subject areas very clearly can be found in *Champions of Change, the impact of the arts on learning*, 1999. The work is a compilation of seven different studies that pertain to the ways art and art education impact schools. In the study with statistics regarding test scores, entitled *Involvement in the Arts and Human Development:General Involvement and Intensive Involvement In Music and Theater Arts*, the data gathered on arts involvement and its relation to other subject areas is quite revealing. Students who were involved in arts courses and activities in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade were compared to those who were uninvolved in the areas of achievement in English classes and quartile placement in standardized test scores, which is separated into the categories of English alone and the composite scores. As can be seen in the chart taken from the study, students who were considered to be “high arts” were much more likely to perform better on standardized tests at both ages, as well as were more likely to earn As or Bs in English (Champions 3). 

It is important to note, however, that the findings of these studies can sometimes be unclear or extremely complex. There are many disputing viewpoints on these matters, but overall many studies do point to a tie between arts education and higher proficiency scores in other subject areas. The question herein becomes whether the higher scores are a matter of correlation or causation. Evidence for the case of causation is compelling. First of all, the way in which the data consistently points to standardized test scores going up across the board even across socioeconomic barriers is important to consider. Also, the sample size for this study was quite large. The data came from more than 25,000 students across the nation. Even while the results must be taken with a grain of salt because the analysis of the effects of art on learning across subject areas is not an exact science, the data and statistical evidence are quite effective in pointing to how arts involvement can positively affect achievement.

One factor of the study that is particularly interesting is the way in which it compares the successes of all students to specifically low SES (socioeconomic status) students. The findings illustrated in the chart from this study point to the notion that the students in lower socioeconomic statuses could benefit greatly from art education and that arts can be a tool used to fight the achievement gap. This study is not isolated in its ability to draw the conclusion that involvement in the arts can assist in closing the achievement gap. Another example of arts making a dent in the achievement gap can be found in a study performed by Montgomery County, 2010. Researchers studied three arts integrated schools, or AIMS schools (when schools integrate arts into their curriculum thoroughly, it means that they make a special commitment to fortifying all of the subject areas with the arts in order to promote learning on every level. The approach makes an effort to teach the material in several ways, including art, which reaches students on more levels than straight-forward approaches that isolate the different subject areas.) The AIMS school that had the highest ratio of low SES and racial minority students was able to reduce the reading gap by 14 percentage points and the math gap by 26 percentage points over a three year time span. When interviewed, the teachers at the school reported that integrating the arts into their curriculum gave them “additional ways of teaching critical thinking skills,” which could be a contribution to the higher levels of achievement.

Arts integration can have a more profound effect on education than merely raising test scores. For example, a way that arts integration positively impacts students in the schools is by motivating them to learn. Motivation due to arts involvement can occur for a number of reasons. First, achieving success in an area of artistic ability may boost the self esteem of some students and cause them to see the fruits of their efforts and persistence in a tangible way. Studies have conclusively shown that students who take part in arts integrated curriculums have a higher self-concept. Through a humanistic lens, these trends suggest that the self esteem gained from success in an arts related field can transfer to academic tasks and social skills. Howard Gardner has captured the essence of this concept, saying that “the compelling reasons for art education... are the likelihood that skill and craft gained in the arts help students to understand that they can improve in other consequential activities and that their heightened skill can give pleasure to themselves and others,” (Critical Links 154).

Another facet of arts integration that may improve motivation in students is the simple fact that those with interests in the arts will be more motivated to complete their work if there are artistic components to the assignments. This is exemplified in a study written by Jeffrey D. Wilhelm in which two learning-disabled readers were encouraged to approach reading in a context that allowed them to express their learning through art. They used visual arts to draw key points of the story, discuss the purpose of illustration, and make a final collage that represented their response to the pieces of literature. The students engaged with the reading on a level they never previously had and were able to comprehend the works on a deeper level due to the arts integration. The study referred to them as “more sophisticated readers” and said that art helped because it provided a “meta-cognitive marking point that allowed the readers to see what they understood.” Because they had a vested interest in art to begin with, they were more motivated to complete the work and analyze their reading. Herein lies one example of students who would not otherwise have been motivated but were because they were drawn in by the arts that could be repeated countless times over to reach the “unreachable” in America’s school systems (Critical Links 144).

Something that could explain this phenomena is Howard Gardner’s Theory of multiple intelligences, which suggests that some students might be more intelligent in areas of musicality or other artistic outlets and would therefore identify with lessons more if they activated those specific intelligences. Gardner himself is quoted as saying “participation in the arts is a wonderful way to develop a range of intelligences in children.”(Critical Links 165) He also seemed to believe that the traits and intelligences refined in arts education like “awareness, judgment, facility, sensibilities, connoisseurship, and other cognitive attributes” would transfer to other areas in academia and life.

One group that has made strides in the field of arts integration has been the Chicago Arts Partnership in Education, or CAPE. Nineteen elementary schools in Chicago operated under the CAPE integration model. Over a six year period, these schools showed consistently higher average scores on the district’s reading and math tests in comparison to the other schools in the district. Another set of schools that focuses on arts integration, North Carolina’s A+ Schools, have been also been a demonstration on the success of integrating arts like music, dance, theater, and visual arts into the curriculum. These schools have been putting out data for more than a decade and have reported consistent growth in student achievement. They also have the right to boast that A+ schools with larger ratios of disadvantaged and minority students performed at the same level as students from more affluent schools on statewide testing (Reinvesting 19-20).

So what are some possible causes that researchers have pointed out for the links between academic achievement and arts involvement? Some researchers went directly to looking at the way the brain functions to answer these questions. They found that students that devoted themselves to a specific art form had longer attention spans and improved general intelligence. This suggests that their ability to devote their attention to their art may transfer to being better able to focus on other things like schoolwork. When it comes to reading itself, research shows that musical training boosts phonological awareness, which is a key component to developing reading skills. Training in the visual arts may also impact reading by training students to visualize, which may be a key to boosting reading comprehension (Reinvesting 22).

When researchers dove into exploring the possible explanations for the gains in achievement at the CAPE schools, they found that students were far more engaged with the curriculum. Their report quotes that “Students who were learning through arts-integrated units expressed no feelings of boredom or discouragement with the learning methods and showed interest in independent learning.” Additionally, after these same students went through non arts-integrated units, they described themselves as discouraged. A higher level of engagement promotes learning and enhances the likelihood that students will remember what they have learned.

Reviewing the effects of arts involvement and integration reveals that not only does it help students on an academic level, but it also improves the entirety of their school experience. According to a U.S. Department of Justice Study, participation in arts programming lead to decreased drug use and increased self esteem among students (Reinvesting 19). Other research has proven that arts involvement leads students to stay in school longer and decrease dropout rates. One study, entitled *The Role of the Fine and Performing Arts in High School Dropout Prevention*, took a look at forty students who were deemed “at risk” for dropping out due to various factors. These students were interviewed, and out of the 22 that reported that they had “seriously considered dropping out”, 6 cited arts involvement as their reason for staying in school and an additional 3 students claimed that they wanted to go into an arts field after they graduate and that that was their motivation to stay in school. In total, 41% of these students stayed in school because of arts involvement. 36 of the students in the group were blatantly asked if arts involvement contributed to their continued enrollment in school, and 83% said yes (Critical Links 85). While this study may seem small and isolated, it is a great example of students who are at risk of dropping out and find the motivation to stay in school because of arts involvement. Arts integration has also been listed as the reason for reduced discipline problems in schools and increased attendance. It seems as though strong arts programming or integration has the ability to create a school culture that students want to be a part of.

The skills and thinking processes that a student learns from being exposed to a solid arts education program will not only affect them during their school years of attendance and testing. They will follow them throughout their entire lives. In our country today, some leaders are concerned that America is losing its ability to be creative and innovative. In *Are They Really Ready to Work*, a production of the Conference Board, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, it is reported that employers are not merely looking for people with basic knowledge, but rather that they want employees who can think creatively and use methods of problem solving in the workplace. Additionally, in 2010, *Newsweek* reported that there has been a significant decline in the test scores of American students in the realm of creativity. The study took a look at 300,000 people of all ages who took a creativity assessment called a Torrence test and noted that the most significant decline has taken place among younger children in America. In order for the next generation of American students to succeed in our ever changing world and compete in the global market, they will need to be creative innovators. Arts integration in the schools could help build these traits (also called “habits of mind”) as it teaches them to tap into their imagination, enhances their creativity, and gives them the capacity to integrate multiple skill sets and perform work across disciplines (Reinvesting 29).

In regards to thinking about education in the arts, it can become easy for onlookers to become swept up in the statistics about improved reading scores and blaring headlines about music improving mathematical thought processes, but there are a number of people who argue that these sensational notions can be dangerous to the essence of art education. They argue that art has its own intrinsic value in and of itself. Further, they believe that building the case for art education entirely on the ways that it can improve other core areas cheapens art by turning it into a crutch of sorts for other disciplines. Two women who embody these notions actually performed research of their own and found results that were contrary to the belief that art helps other subject areas. Their names are Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland, and they are a part of Project Zero, an arts education program at the [Harvard](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/h/harvard_university/index.html?inline=nyt-org) Graduate School of Education. Their research has been received with a great deal of backlash and criticism, but the interesting part of their stance on the matter is that they do not seem to care. They maintain that the act of learning art has a great deal of importance all on its own. Winner says of the matter, “These instrumental arguments are going to doom the arts to failure, because any superintendent is going to say, ‘If the only reason I’m having art is to improve math, let’s just have more math.’” The arguments on this end of the spectrum are that art can teach so much more than relying on them to boost other subject areas gives them credit for, like seeing from different perspectives, empathy, playfulness, and the ability to make and learn from mistakes (Pogrebin 2007). There is also something to be said about the cultural connectedness that occurs when one is exposed to the world of art in any capacity. It comes down to the powerful experience that only exposure to the arts can provide. We learn things about the human condition and our place within it through studying and producing art that nothing else can teach us .

Through the intense study of a number of studies related to the benefits of art education, the conclusion that the benefits of art education are real and important is quite apparent. Not only is there direct evidence that learning an art can improve test scores in reading and math through the transfer of skills and habits, but the lives of students improve when art education and involvement are made available to them. The culture of schools has been shown to improve when arts integration comes into play, which has in turn proven to decrease behavioral issues and dropout rates. Students who are educated in and through the arts are more motivated to succeed and have higher self esteem as well. They leave school with the habits of mind necessary in a world that demands creativity, innovation, and problem solving skills. Edward Pauly, director of research and evaluation at the Wallace Foundation, which finances arts education, does a nice job of summing up the experiential importance of being exposed to art and the way that it promotes empathy and tolerance. He says “There is no substitute for listening to jazz, seeing ‘Death of a Salesman’ performed, reading ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’ seeing the Vietnam War Memorial. Those powerful experiences only come about through the arts.”

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