

The Benefits of Visual Art in  
Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade Education

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The arts are often credited with inspiring creativity and self-expression, however, little thought is often given to how else they inspire and change the world and the people in it. The three major categories of the arts are visual art, performing art, and literary art. Visual art includes drawing, painting, sculpture, and many more mediums. Performing art includes theater, music, and dance. Finally, literary art includes creative writing and poetry. Art is important in education especially for students who may not have access to the arts outside of school. While all three forms of the arts are important for students to participate in, visual art, and the benefits students receive from participating in visual art, will be the foremost emphasis of the following paper.

In schools, visual art can be seen in the art classroom and outside of the art classroom in other classrooms as projects, as areas of study, or in art integration. History class has a unique connection with art because often early history is studied by looking at the culture's artwork. When looking at ancient cultures, students study their utensils, homes, and more that was that culture's art. When pictures accompany this time and later time periods in history books, they are paintings or drawings or other forms of art that artists created during that time period. Often in other classes, art is used as a project for students to combine their learning. In science, an example of this is students creating a comic strip to describe a law or students creating a diagram or model of something they have learned. In an English language arts classroom, visual art can be seen when students are asked to draw or create a scene from a novel or play they are reading. Arts integration is different than art class crossover or art projects in

other classes. Art integration is “a teaching strategy that seamlessly merges arts standards with core curricula to build connections and provide engaging context” (Nobori, 2012). An example of art integration used in schools is students using Andy Warhol’s Campbell Soups to learn fractions or students creating dances to learn how planets move (Nobori, 2012). Art is not an extra project in an arts integrated classroom but used as a teaching method. Regardless of whether art is found in an art classroom or in a different classroom, the benefits of art in schools are numerous.

The benefits of generating and retaining art programs in elementary schools through high schools are extensive. Students receive benefits in many different areas including promotion of skills needed in later schooling and post schooling, overall better mental health, higher levels of motivation, and overall the schools show a higher academic performance and superior student behavior. These benefits can be seen in averages of students’ test scores, in the classroom environment, and in the students themselves. While not all of the benefits of visual arts are quantifiable, the benefits are nonetheless extensive and observable in students.

Art provides students with an opportunity to improve skills that are not as easily accessed in general education classes. Some of these skills include creativity, development of ideas and opinions, accountability and collaboration, empathy, reception of critique, problem solving, risk taking, confidence, motor skills, and countless more (Strauss). While some of these skills can be worked on in other

classrooms and subject areas, art provides a place for students to improve on all of these skills almost simultaneously and in a more effective way. In an art classroom, the content and the classwork is much different than that of a general education subject because of the connection between an artist and their creation.

When a student creates an artwork, they have to contemplate what the beliefs they want to express are. They then have to be able to transfer their beliefs into the medium in which they are working in a way that is able to convey that belief to other people. By doing this, students are given the chance to explore their own beliefs more deeply and are able to better understand those beliefs. Students are also learning how to express those beliefs to other people in the most effective way. While viewing other people's artwork, students are given the opportunity to perceive the world through the artist's viewpoint. By perceiving the world through someone else's viewpoint, students can develop their feelings of empathy and understanding and broaden their knowledge. While other subjects may ask students to study different beliefs, art asks students to learn their own beliefs and learn how to take into consideration other people's beliefs as well. Encountering art helps people "...identify with one another..." and helps people connect (Eliasson, 2016).

Similar to participation in sports or athletic activities, participation in art helps students to develop their motor skills. Participation in visual art can help students improve their fine motor skills and can work students' large muscles as well (Ellison

2016). While drawing, painting, or sculpting a shape, students are improving their hand eye coordination because their hand is following their eye while creating (Ellison 2016). Students in younger grades also work on fine motor skills in art through tearing paper in specific shapes, using scissors, or learning how hard to press when using a pencil or other utensil (Ellison 2016). In older grade levels, students can improve their fine motor skills through creating more detailed or advanced artworks. Students can also work their large muscles in an art class at all grade levels. When creating artwork while standing, students are working their muscles they use for posture and working their arm muscles as well since their arm is not resting on a desk or a table (Ellison 2016). When working on very large works, students may need to walk around the piece or stand up and sit down or kneel (Ellison 2016). While creating these larger art pieces especially, students are given a chance in the classroom to be active and work their larger muscles. Creating art is a physical activity and art class reflects that.

Art can also instill confidence in students, especially if they are able to participate in art in schools. Every student excels in something different. While some students excel in math or science, others may excel in writing, reading, sports, or art. A professional portrait artist comments on this in a book. Chuck Close struggled in school due to dyslexia that went undiagnosed at the time (Close 2012). When Close drew a detailed timeline for his history class, his teachers realized that he did want to learn and had an interest in the material, Close just struggled with learning or expressing what he learned (Close 2012). Close claims that drawing saved him in school (Close 2012).

When Close found out that he could draw better than most of his classmates, he pushed himself to work hard and continued on in school (Close 2012). Art class was the time in the school day that Close looked forward to the most (Close 2012). For Chuck Close, art class and art projects in other classes is what gave Close the confidence he needed to work hard and continue in school (Close 2012). If art can give confidence to one struggling student, there are other struggling students that need art in their school day to instill confidence in themselves and in their learning abilities.

Art offers the opportunity for students to improve many different skills and the improvement of mental health is another benefit attributed to art. Art therapy is commonly known to improve the mental health of people. Art therapy is often used in the cases of traumatic brain injuries to help in the recovery of patients. However, a study done by the University of Western Australia surveyed how art improved mental health not through people's interaction with art therapy, which is controlled and used for specific purposes, but rather through people's interaction with art in their daily lives ("Interest in arts can boost mental health: study" 2016). Seven hundred two adults in Australia participated in this study ("Interest in arts can boost mental health: study" 2016). The study described interaction with art as either active- creating artworks, playing music, etc.- or passive- viewing artworks, listening to music ("Interest in arts can boost mental health: study" 2016). Individuals who spent one hundred hours per year viewing or creating art, listening to music, watching dance, and other various art activities, reported on average higher levels of mental health and well-being than

individuals that spent less time than one hundred hours per year ("Interest in arts can boost mental health: study" 2016). One hundred hours per year divides to about only two hours a week. Interacting with art for only two hours a week is all it took for the adults in the study to have higher levels of confidence, happiness, and self-esteem ("Interest in arts can boost mental health: study" 2016). These adults also reported lower levels of stress and feelings of social isolation ("Interest in arts can boost mental health: study" 2016). It is apparent that art benefits those who come in contact with it even when not in a controlled environment that is tailored to the person such as art therapy is.

When such major mental health benefits are seen in adults, the benefits are likely to be seen in children as well. By taking art out of schools, or not offering art in schools, students are not being given the chance in classrooms to boost their mental health. In a time when much attention is placed on the mental health of our students- whether it be the attempt to stop bullying, the crusade to end gun violence, or the prevention of suicide- it is unclear why more art programs are not being offered in schools. While some students may be able to access the arts outside of school, others do not have this opportunity. By offering just two hours a week of art in school it can significantly improve the mental health of students.

Art increases the motivation in some students to either attend classes or work harder in those classes. If a student has no motivation to do something, they will likely

not do as well as they are capable of doing. Students are motivated by many different and diverse things. Just as some students are motivated to come to and do well in school because they want to play on their basketball team, some students are motivated to come to school and do well so they can participate in art programs or classes because they may not have that opportunity outside of school. Students who are involved in the arts are three times more likely to be awarded for attendance ("11 Facts About Arts in Education"). In order for a student to be involved in the arts through their school, they have to attend that school. Not only are students more likely to be awarded for attendance, they are also less likely to drop out of school. The dropout rate of high risk students who are involved in the arts is significantly less than the dropout rate of high risk students who are not involved in the arts ("11 Facts About Arts in Education"). Students who are offered the chance to be involved in the arts are on average more motivated to come to school and more motivated in class while in school.

Not only are students more motivated to come to school when they are offered the chance to participate in art, they are often more motivated in the classroom. I observed at an elementary school where art class was one day a week for thirty minutes. There was one student who had a reputation for not paying attention in class, avoiding working on classwork, and being a distraction to other students in the classroom. When talking with the art teacher, she said she rarely had any problems with any of the behavior the student was known for in her classroom. From what I observed, the student was very excited to learn about art. The student paid attention in

class and worked hard on all of the artworks. If a work did not turn out how the student wanted it to, or a mistake was made, the student would either find a way to fix the mistake or ask to start over. The student was motivated to make the best art that he was capable of making. While there were some times when the student slipped up and was distracted during a lesson or got out of their seat unnecessarily, overall it was clear the student was motivated to do well in art the art classroom. Other classrooms may see benefits within this student if the student is given a chance in the general education classroom to create artwork for learning purposes.

While it may surprise some, art is often linked to higher academic performance. Music has often been referenced in recent years to help students achieve higher in math. However, it is not only music that nurtures students' academic performance. Participation in art is shown to close the academic achievement gap between students from high income families and students from low income families. The National Endowment for the Arts report in 2012 showed that "a student from a low-socioeconomic (SES) background with a high-arts educational experience significantly outperformed peers from a low-arts, low-SES background" (OBrien, 2013). The report also shows that high school students from a low-SES background with high arts participation had higher grade point averages than peers with a low-arts participation and from a low-SES background and in some cases outperformed all students (OBrien, 2013). Correlation was also show between high arts participation and the graduation rate in the report. Only four percent of students from low- SES backgrounds with a

high arts participation did not graduate from high school while twenty two percent of peers from low-SES backgrounds with low arts participation and seven percent of students overall did not graduate (Obrien, 2013). Students with a high participation in the arts were also shown to be more likely to attend and finish college- “71 percent of high-arts, low-SES students attended college compared to 48 percent of low-arts, low-SES students; ... 24 percent [of low-SES, high arts participation students] achieved an associate’s degree, compared to...10 percent...of low arts, low-SES students” (OBrien 2013). The report clearly shows a correlation between the achievement of low-SES background students and the amount of time they participate in art. When students from a low-SES background are given opportunities to participate in the arts, they are more likely to succeed, closing the achievement gap in the process.

In addition to helping close the academic achievement gap, participation in art has more benefits for academic achievement. Students who are English Language Learners (ELL) are “...students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds...” (“English-Language Learner Definition” 2013). Often, ELL students struggle in the classroom. What has been shown through various schools is that there are a number of benefits that art provides for ELL students when they are given the opportunity to participate in the arts in school.

A school in New Mexico shows just how much ELL students can benefit from providing opportunities for art in the school. Students in the school were consistently outperforming other students in the state that were demographically matched in both math and reading (Ingraham, 2016). Many students in the school were English Language Learners (Ingraham, 2016). Researchers were confused by student's high scores until they saw what was happening in the school. The school offered students many opportunities to participate in art (Ingraham, 2016). The students had a "well-rounded class curriculum that meets the needs of all students" (Ingraham, 2016). Students were able to show what they learned in a way other than writing the information out which could be a bias, especially for ELL students. Test scores were greatly improved and students enjoyed learning (Ingraham, 2016). Because students were given a chance to reflect on and show what they learned in a way other than writing, students who are ELLs were able to succeed in the classroom (Ingraham, 2016). By offering opportunities for their students to participate in the arts and learn through art, this school has seen the benefits that art offers especially for English Language Learner Students.

Art does not only benefit students who are struggling, students across the school environment benefit. Some of the countries with the highest scores in math and science are countries with mandatory art programs in their schools ("11 Facts About Arts in Education"). Japan, Hungary, and the Netherlands all consistently rank among the highest test scores for math and science and all three have mandatory art programs ("11

Facts About Arts in Education"). Some schools in the United States are also seeing the benefits of have art programs in their schools, whether it be through separate classes in art or through an art integrated curricula.

One school that has increased their student's opportunities to participate in art through an art integrated curricula is Bates Middle School. Art integration is special in that art is used as a teaching method in the classroom rather than a side project for students to create after learning (Nobori 2012). The students at Bates Middle School use art in their everyday classrooms in ways such as learning fractions using Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup paintings and choreographing a dance to learn how planets move (Nobori 2012). The school reported a "...23 percent drop in the average number of referrals and suspensions per student" between 2009 and 2012 (Nobori 2012). As well as seeing an improvement in students' behavior, Bates Middle School has seen a growth in the amount of students proficient or advanced in math four times more than the state's growth and in reading five times more than the state's over the same period of time (Nobori 2012). Also reported is "substantial improvements in student comprehension and retention" in Bates Middle School after integrating the arts (Nobori 2012). Arts integration uses teaching practices that have been shown to improve both comprehension and retention because students elaborate on what they learn, better embedding the information (Nobori 2012). Not only are students learning more and recalling it, students are also having fun learning. It was observed that in the classroom, students are more actively participating and more enthusiastically

participating as well (Nobori 2012). By changing the curriculum to an arts integrated curriculum, Bates Middle School has offered their students further opportunities to participate in the arts. In turn, the students are achieving more in class, behaving better, and having fun while doing so. Arts integration has greatly improved the Bates Middle School environment.

While the benefits students receive from art are diverse and numerous, art classes in schools are often very limited. In elementary and middle school, art class is often only one to three times a week at most and is not very diverse. In my elementary and middle school, we had music class at least twice a week but did not attend a visual art class. In middle school, visual art class was either four or five times a week (if a student was a part of band, they would be pulled out of the class one day a week), lasting for a quarter of the school year. Other elementary schools in the area that have a visual art class only offer the class one day a week. Frequently, the art teacher's time is divided between different schools in the district and between all of the classes in the schools. Because of the art teacher's limited time, the students are unable to spend more than thirty to forty-five minutes a week on art. One local high school offers an elementary "art camp" to students in their elementary school who want more opportunities to create art. Overall, the art teacher says that the students love this camp and there is always more students that want to sign up than there is room in the classroom. For this reason, she offers two art camps throughout the year. These students want to be given the chance to learn about art and create their own art. As a

society, we should be encouraging this curiosity for learning by offering more opportunities for students to participate in art in schools.

In high schools, art class offerings are typically a little more diverse than in elementary school and middle school, however, in some schools there is still not a wide selection. In my high school there were five art classes- fine arts, art 1, art 2, and advanced art (split into two sections). Fine arts was a requirement for all freshmen and consisted of a quarter of the year studying visual art, a quarter studying music, a quarter studying dance, and a quarter studying drama. The advanced art class was a combined class for students who would either be in art three or art four. The art one through art three classes were split into studying different types of visual art- drawing, painting, and ceramics. Students did one large project in each medium for each class. In art four, students were required to create their own projects using mediums we used in class before or ones that we had not. This class was more open ended to what the student wanted to do. At other high schools, the art programs are slightly different in their curriculum. I observed in a high school where the classes were separated into art 1, a freshman art class, drawing, painting, and senior art in one semester. Different classes were offered during the second semester. Because the classes were specialized instead of generalized, students were able to more deeply explore one type of medium. While the classes were more specific to one medium of art, there was not much diversity in the types of classes offered.

After talking with art teachers in the area, it is clear that art funding is lacking. School budgets are not large enough to cover all that is needed for supplies. If the art class does have a budget, in some schools there is no budget, it is sometimes not even large enough to cover basic supplies that teachers can order at the beginning of the year. In several schools the supplies ordered must last the entire year as there is not a second order later in the school year to replace supplies. While the school budget can cover at least part of basic supplies, sometimes school booster clubs give money for more supplies. Students and parents participate in fundraisers to raise money for supplies and the program. At some of the local schools, the students and parents are organizing a 5k run/ walk, a trivia night, selling plants, and selling coupon cards, among other fundraisers. In some schools, especially elementary and middle school, students are asked to bring in their own supplies of crayons, glue, colored pencils, and markers. While some of these supplies are available in the classroom, there is not enough money to supply all of the students. In my high school, all basic art supplies were provided by the school. However, if there was a project that a student wanted to create that used supplies other than basic art supplies, the student had to buy those supplies on their own using their own money. When there is a shortage of materials in the class or there is a project that requires materials that are not the basic supplies the school can supply, the art teacher is often the one who pays the difference. At many schools, teachers want their students to have to opportunity to create art using more advanced materials. Unfortunately, these materials are often unaffordable by the school budget for each

student to be supplied. In these instances, several teachers have commented that they have bought a set of the supplies themselves for students in the classroom to share. When the school budget can only cover basic materials, it is difficult for art programs to grow and offer more diverse classes.

Art is one of the first subject areas to be cut when there is a budget cut in the school. On standardized tests, students are not tested on art. This is one reason why time spent in art classes is often thought of as time that could be better spent in other subject areas that students are tested on (Nobori 2012). It is often believed that if more time is spent on a subject, students will do better on it. However, it is shown that it is the quality of the time spent that matters. Schools that have taken time to spend on art during the day have students that outperform other demographically matched students, even when less time is spent on subjects the students are tested on. This is because students are able to reflect on what they learned in a more memorable way and are offered different approaches to the same topic. Because of cuts made to schools and art departments, there are various programs that are working to show others just how important art is in schools and improve the funding of art departments in schools.

One program in recent years that has been instrumental in proving how beneficial the arts are in schools is the Turnaround Arts Program. This program was founded in 2011 by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities under the leadership of Michelle Obama (Turnaround Arts). This program works in "the lowest

performing ten percent” of this country’s elementary and middle schools (Turnaround Arts). The schools that are a part of this program are given funds to improve their arts programs (Turnaround Arts). Currently, Turnaround Arts is found across seventeen states, in seventy-three schools, reaching fifty thousand students (Turnaround Arts). Significant improvements were found in the schools that had this program. A three year program evaluation in 2015 revealed that schools showed “significant improvement in academic achievement, reduction in disciplinary referrals and increases in attendance, among other findings” (Turnaround Arts). The amount of these improvements that was shown in schools was staggering. Compared to schools that received school improvement grants (SIG schools), students at Turnaround Arts schools improved significantly more- improving six and thirty five hundredths percent more in math and seven and four hundredths percent more in reading (Turnaround Arts). SIG schools do not specifically use their funds for art programs while Turnaround Arts schools do. The difference in achievement leads to the conclusion that art is what is making the difference. What is even more impressive in this study than the students’ academic performance is the improvements in the students’ behavior in schools. Between 2011 and 2014, just three years, New Orleans saw about an eighty one percent drop in the amount of in-school suspensions and Boston saw almost an eighty-six percent drop in the amount of overall suspensions (Turnaround Arts). These significant drops in suspensions were not seen over many years, only over the course of three years. The schools that Turnaround Arts programs are working in are seeing

improvements in not only students' academic achievement, but also their students' behavior in relatively short periods of time. Overall, Turnaround Arts programs are improving the schools they are a part of in both academics and behavior immensely.

Along with the Turnaround Arts Program funded by the government, there are various smaller organizations that are working to boost the arts in education. These programs work hard to bring in donations to help schools be able to offer art to their students. There is a lot that you can do to help as well. Be an advocate for the arts. Know what is happening in your school for your local art programs. By knowing what is going on, you are able to step into the conversation of what is happening in your local art programs and help fix the problems. Another way you can help is by volunteering. Local art programs could be looking for volunteers such as you to help with events for fundraising or for art camps. Or, the art program may be in need of other resources that you can offer. The most substantial way that you can support the arts is to show your support for local art programs. In Lebanon, the high school has an annual visual art show to present what students have worked on throughout the year. Other schools also have annual shows where student's work is shown. McKendree University is fortunate to have the McKendree University Gallery of Art to show student artwork in senior shows and the biannual All Student Show, featuring artwork from all students who took an art class. The McKendree University Gallery of Art also presents shows throughout the year featuring work from local artists or artists who have some connection to Lebanon. By coming to gallery shows and receptions, you are showing

your support for art in the community. All it takes is a show of support from the community to change the course of art in education!

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