

# Educational Practice for Social Change: Where Does Art Education Fit In?

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## ABSTRACT

Lack of consensus about what value art education has in today's back-to-basics educational climate has impacted art programs in terms of marginalizing and/or eliminating them, particularly in urban districts struggling to meet non-arts testing mandates. Younger public school students who are key recipients of art education have been excluded from contributing their perceptions of art's value to the conversation. The study presented in this article investigated the perceptions of elementary and middle school inner-city art students on the value of art education. The overarching question sought a general understanding about what inner-city public school students at the elementary and middle school levels perceived art education's value to be. The secondary questions examined how these students compared the value of their art education in relation to the value of other school subjects, and what role art served overall as a means of self-expression. An interpretive case study centered on in-depth interviews with 10 students was used to gather data for answering these questions. Data from parents, teachers, and school staff, plus classroom observations and document analyses, were used to triangulate students' perceptions. The data were analyzed using the spiral approach for interpretive analysis, with coding used to identify relevant themes and topics. The urban children in this study perceived art as a distinct and highly valued school subject, compared to other subjects. Findings suggested that art education recognizes a natural mode of self-expression for children, and fosters self-esteem and expanded avenues for achievement. A subsequent investigation supported the study's findings. Social change can be powerfully affected by informing curriculum design with this knowledge, thereby increasing opportunities for urban children to succeed grounded in their strengths.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY AND SUBSEQUENT INVESTIGATION

Each section in this introduction is intended to familiarize the reader with essential background information regarding the study, as well as a less formal additional inquiry that followed. It is ordered in a way that will first highlight art education's general situation, and then focus on specific components that are pertinent to this particular investigation. The initial overview leads into the research problem and the three questions behind the problem. The researcher's role as an educator researcher will be discussed. The purpose of the investigation and its significance for students, educators, administrators, policymakers, and communities will be delineated.

### Overview

This study addressed a problem in the field of art education regarding how the value of art education can be determined in today's standardized test-focused world (Gee, 2004; Kohn, 1999). It investigated this problem from a child-centered perspective while concurrently weighing in historic and contemporary adult pedagogy, policy, and visions of art education. Urban public schools were at the forefront of the investigation. Since only non-arts subjects are included in high-stakes standardized testing, art programs have been cut or reduced to a marginal status relative to other tested subjects, particularly in struggling inner-city schools where test scores frequently continue to flounder (Kohn, 1999). Additionally, art education has historically lacked a secure status in American schools, with art programs thriving in some districts, and nonexistent in others (Gude, 2004; Hope, 2004). Shifting perceptions about art education have resulted from its frequent delegation to being an "extra" or "frills" subject. Despite mounting, research-based evidence that art education is not only beneficial but central to a complete K-12

education and beyond, art is often relegated to being a “core” subject on paper only (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Chapman, 2005; Dorn, 1999; The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; Sousa, 2001; Sternberg, 1999.)

Securing consensus about the reasons art programs might be retained is elusive even among arts educators. The latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in various differing stances on the perceived value of the arts in general education. Some of these stances featured arguments for the arts’ importance in terms of cognitive development, the arts as catalysts for success in other subjects, the arts as the nucleus of cultural studies, and the arts as a realm of human experience that is unique and essential to optimum development and growth (Chapman, 1982; Gardner & Perkins, 1989; Jensen, 2001; Smith, 2006).

At best, art has been only tentatively included among “the basics” in American schools. Partially in response to the tightening of traditionally core subjects’ standards, in the 1990s new policies and standards for arts curriculum were created, including the National Standards for Arts Education (National Association for Music Education, 2006). Beginning in January 1992, the United States government funded voluntary creation of standards for basic subjects. Subsequently, funding was made available for “other subjects,” and the Music Educators National Conference—which later became The National Association for Music Education, or MENC—combined efforts with the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations to devise K-12 national standards for dance, music, theatre, and visual arts. This leveling of the educational playing field for all curricular areas seemed to redefine the arts’ purpose and value; however, it also sparked controversies about the nature of arts education, and prompted philosophical

debates about the need for those purposes and values in schools (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Jorgensen, 1996; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, & Brooks, 2004).

### The Problem

Students' experiences are being relegated to the periphery when decisions about art curriculum and the necessity of maintaining existing and future art programs are under discussion. The value of art programs cannot be fully determined without understanding the students' feelings as recipients of the programs. In addition, a student-centered learning experience in art is not possible unless the students are added to the discussion. Specific factors are identifiable which frame the problem. One is a perception factor. Art education is not perceived as being important enough to include on the all-powerful standardized tests—but what about the perceptions of teachers, principals, parents, and, most importantly, the students that schools are supposed to serve? Lack of sufficient research in this regard contributes to the problem.

Another factor is a general lack of awareness about what art education contributes to a comprehensive education. Perhaps if students' voices were part of the collective research findings, authorities purporting to plan school systems with students' needs in mind would take a second look at art education studies. Deeply grounded traditions are not easily reformed, but with adequate evidence it is possible to expand thinking and affect change.

The issues described are compounded within struggling urban school districts. Students who arrive at school from neighborhoods where poverty, violence, and drug use dominate their lives outside of school—and whose test scores happen to be the lowest—are further deprived of opportunities that could offer enrichment and hope in their lives.

The security of quality art programs in schools is being undermined by their frequent marginalization when deemed to be non-core areas of study, and therefore expendable (Chapman, 2005; Fowler, 1996; Gude, 2004; Hope, 2004; Kozol, 2005). As high-stakes standardized tests increasingly dominate the direction taken by educational policymakers and school administrators, art education and other subjects that are not considered to be a significant part of the tests (and thus less important for continuing funding that is linked to required test scores) are overlooked in favor of the basics (Fowler, 1996; Gude, 2004; Hope, 2004; Jensen, 2001).

This problem is negatively impacting students, art specialists, schools, and communities because an essential component of education is being removed, diminished, or threatened (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005; Chapman, 2005; Clark & Zimmerman, 2004; Eisner, 2002). Without art shows, performances, and community arts partnerships, rich cultural experiences are being denied not only to students, but also their neighborhoods when art programs are cut (Anderson & Milbrandt; Chapman, 2005; Clark & Zimmerman, 2004; Dorn, 1999). Particularly in impoverished neighborhoods, schools can serve as a link to experiences in the arts that would otherwise be non-existent for students and their families.

The problem at the core of this study and, in fact, the motivating force behind all my research interests, have previously been addressed rarely or scantily in terms of students' perceptions and needs. To help fill this gap, I am concerned as a researcher about supplying the perspective of public school art students. To this end, constructivism was the theoretical foundation for my work. The study at hand rests in the constructivist view that individual truth is formed by circumstances and experiences that are unique to

each person. Thus, a universal truth cannot be determined by others, and requires the one who constructs the truth (art students) to reveal it to someone else (the researcher).

### Methodology of the Study

This study explored perceptions of art's value from the position that art education contributes unique and distinct learning and developmental experiences in children's lives. Determining what such experiences may be is sought from the perspectives of 10 actual children. A student-centered determination of art education's influence is the focus. The exploration involved a qualitative, interpretive case study to investigate three research questions. The overarching research question addressed in this study was, "What is the value of art education for inner-city public school students from their own perspectives?" Two secondary questions were, "What are some inner-city students' perceptions about the influence of art education in their lives in relation to the influence of other school subjects in their lives?" and "What role do they perceive art to serve as a means of self-expression?"

It was critically important in this study to gain insights about how inner-city students perceive art education, and to allow their voices to be a part of this knowledge area. Therefore the 10 participants involved were limited to inner-city students for investigating these questions, and represented Grades 1 through 8. Students in elementary and middle school have been overlooked in terms of formal studies about their perceptions of art and art education, so this age group was investigated. Deciding on 10 students was the result of determining how to best answer the research questions. It was reasoned that one student from each grade, plus two special education students (one elementary and one middle school) could be representative of the various age levels, yet

keep the amount of experiences manageable enough to delve into and really begin to understand. Equal numbers of males and females were used. Participants were Latino, African American, and Caucasian to reflect the community's racial composition.

The focus school district was an urban community in southern New Jersey. This district was selected for its similarities to the one I have taught in throughout my career. Although I conducted the pilot study for this research in my own district, for the sake of a broader experience that still met the parameters I sought in terms of the participants and setting, I looked to a different district that paralleled my own for this study.

Currently I am conducting further, less formal studies that build on both the pilot study and the study featured in this article. Parts of this work will be presented toward the end of the discussion.

#### The Researcher's Background

As an art educator in the inner-city schools of Atlantic City, New Jersey for over two decades, I have witnessed firsthand the possibilities which open up for my "failing" students in the arts. Although their minds and bodies are severely distracted by real life from the rote test preparations and the latest programs-in-favor for pushing them to pass the tests, when students become engaged in expressing themselves personally in art, an eager, hungry, creative side of the children is tapped into. Accessing this inner core is thrilling. The brilliance that emerges from doing so has garnered my failing students not only self-satisfaction but also local, national, and international recognition. After participating in at least facets of kindergarten through grade 12 students' artistic worlds for over 20 years, I have felt an increasing urge to somehow showcase this part of their

childhood experience, and allow the young artists themselves to host the event. The result was this study, as well as my continuing investigations of students' authentic evaluation of art's place in their lives.

### Research Findings

It is the policy of the school district where this study took place to remain anonymous in all research reports. Therefore, before discussion of the results, the system for referring to the key players in this study will be reviewed. My district contact was a K-8 art teacher, is referred to as "Mrs. A" (Art). The students were anonymously named according to grade and gender. For example, a second-grade girl is designated 2F (second grade female). Additional descriptive codes were added for special education (SE) or duplicate gender/grades (4M1; 4M2).

The room was a large square shape, roughly 40' x 40' with three side-by-side, rectangular windows on two of the walls. It was a standard style school classroom, but Mrs. A infused it with homey, handmade touches everywhere, such as non-institutional wooden furniture pieces, tablecloths, and toys. Students sat grouped at 6 solid work tables placed in the center of the room. The room's perimeters consisted storage cabinets, sinks, and many displays of students' work and inspirational postings.

*Conclusions to Research Question 1: Of what value is art education in the perceptions of inner-city public school students at the elementary and middle school levels?*

Three themes emerged in response to the first research question. Art education is valued for the joy derived from creating art, for the recognition and celebration of a specific talent and/or strength, and the possibilities students felt it brought into their lives in terms of their futures—possibly as a way out of poverty for some.

Overall, the data I gathered for this central research question driving my study revealed that the joy of self-expression for my participants is summarized in the first

identified theme, students' perceptions of art's value in terms of freedom of self-expression and being a fun part of children's lives. Equally valued are the rewards that follow from having opportunities to express themselves freely through art education activities. Value was determined by the participants' own definitions as derived from the data in terms of individually identified benefits as well as a collective consensus that learning about and making art is an essential part of how they define themselves.

Data emerging from interviews, journals, and observations repeatedly pointed to art's role as a vehicle for providing the participants with a sense of freedom for expressing themselves that is unique to art and not possible in other modes of self-expression. Art represented a distinct and natural language for these urban children. Vygotsky (1978) discussed in depth the significance of children's learning explorations in the realm of imagination as an aspect of learning that constitutes an important role in child development, albeit an area lacking clarity and consensus in terms of a definitive educational doctrine. The findings from my study resonated with this and other important theories.

The second theme arising from data that were applied in response to the first research question, the finding that art is highly valued for inner-city public school children in terms of opportunities for recognition of art-specific accomplishments and natural strengths, suggested that art and art education represents an arena for acknowledging abilities reported to be very important in the views of the participants. Participants, parents, and school staff described art education as a source of pride as well as a venue for showcasing children's talents and strengths. Feelings of self-efficacy not

found in other venues were described in relation to art activities, particularly for special education students.

The third theme, art's value for urban children as an avenue for overcoming barriers in society and achieving success as an adult reaffirmed the above mentioned feelings of empowerment discussed by the participants; but it also introduced divergent data indicating that the empowerment is transitory for many students in that it exists during school years but necessarily diminishes as students enter the real world where society devalues art achievements. Although many of the participants felt that this devaluation is tied specifically to career and salary opportunities and not society's general esteem for culture, it impacted their overall estimation of art's ultimate value in their lives. As suggested earlier, this construction was the case particularly for the more economically secure participants who were encouraged most at home to seek traditionally lucrative professions. These students seemed to excel in multiple academic and extracurricular areas.

Conversely, participants with few doubts about art's role as their means for escaping oppression as lower level students from challenging home situations placed high value on the ability of art to empower people. I sensed a determination in these participants to make sure that their talents and artistic achievements did not fall to the wayside, despite discouraging messages that the students may receive from sources outside their constructed realities. Even teachers and parents seemed to grasp at this source of hope for the neediest children. For example, one special education aide warmly welcomed me to the school, explaining that she "just *knew* that if my students' creativity was recognized they could go somewhere in life" and hoped I was some sort of "talent

scout.” 3F’s mother spoke with me on the phone and meticulously recounted her daughter’s artistic accomplishments and backed them up with anecdotal instances about daily demonstrations of 3F’s imagination and inventiveness. In sum, the data for the first research question produced story after story about participants’ emotional investment in a subject that had individual significance for them in deeply personal ways.

*Conclusions to Research Question 2: How do these students compare the value of their art education in relation to the value of other school subjects?*

Across all the responses to every component of the research questions, one key conclusion emerged that permeated all the rest: unequivocally, all participants in this study perceived their art education as an important aspect of what they considered to be a complete education. For the second research question, this knowledge provides a clear answer in that the participants’ perception of art education’s value is one of complete equality when its value is compared to other subjects. It also contains strong inferences for the other questions, with its inherent message suggesting that art education is important to them beyond serving as mere hobby or extra class in their schedules. This stance contrasts sharply with the frequent delegation for art education as a frill or support subject (Fowler, 1996; Smith, 2006). In relation to the pilot study’s findings, on the other hand, the participants’ stance is in full harmony (to be discussed shortly).

The participants offered comparisons between their affective responses to art versus other subject areas. For example, 5M described the difference between learning math and learning art by explaining his feelings in both situations. In math class, he worried that if he was absent one day or was not paying attention when an important step was explained he would “get kind of confused and lost”; art, however, allowed for

“figuring it out your own way even if it means your work will be different from everyone else’s”. These differences do not make art “less as a subject”, in 5M’s estimation—it is just different, and a welcome difference at that. He added that most other subjects conform to the situation he described in his math class, so art class is a relief and a good balance with the others. 6F made frequent comparisons between learning writing and art, both of which are her strong classes in school. She felt that the two overlap in many ways, pointing out that in the early cultures she had been studying in social studies, art *was* writing. In her words:

When you think about it, the cavemen and the Native Americans were the first to start art. Just because they drew and drew for words, doesn’t mean they’re dumb. They created fire! We don’t appreciate important things sometimes. They had beautiful things in their lives. The Native Americans’ names were long, they were symbols too. I like when things are interesting like that. My name in Native American is a beautiful picture, so was my best friend’s. We could draw our names! (6F)

The above examples contributed to the second theme I was able to delineate for answering my research question about how urban children compare art’s value to that of other subjects, as they indicated that the participants valued the different but welcome way of learning found in art classes. Greene (1995) lamented the “dark times” presently found in education, mourning the “knowledge concealed...when we ignore the transmitting of knowledge” that includes imagination, particularly for poor students” (pp. 44-51). The conclusions to each question in this study, notably those in Question 2, offer that a child-centered curriculum provides hope in the present day educational conundrum she described.

*Conclusions to Research Question 3: What role do children perceive art to serve as a means of self-expression?*

The findings in this focus area of the study pointed to art's role for the participants as an activity that offers chances for them to explore their interests and creativity without undue judgments and pre-ordained rules and as a productive opportunity for creative self-expression in a playful context. The enthusiasm with which the students described their diverse art activities both in and outside of art class was indicative of a general consensus that art served them as an accessible resource for expressing themselves in a basic human way, through artistic imagery.

The teachers I talked to at School A seemed in agreement as well, many voicing regret that they could not incorporate more art approaches into their lessons—mainly due to the tight test preparation curriculum requirements. They described their students “thriving” and “engaged” during art-based lessons. One kindergarten ESL (English as Second Language) teacher described how relaxed her students became when asked to illustrate their ideas and stories versus the painstaking challenge of forming ideas and then writing them in a new language. It emerged repeatedly in the data that art served in a role as a familiar and safe haven for children across the K-8 grade levels to comfortably express their ideas.

#### Follow-up Investigation

During the year following my study, I continued to seek insights from the recipients of art education about what its role, value, and significance is in their educational experience. My current high school students offered views from older art students to compare with my data from the K-8 study. This added information about changes in perceptions according to children's developmental stages as well as increased exposure to arts education in their lives.

In this simplified and informal inquiry, I posted a question in all of my art classes for students in grades 9-12 (special education and regular education students) to voluntarily respond to on paper. They were invited to leave the responses anonymously in a pile as they exited class, or include their names if desired. I asked that they indicate their gender and grade, but they could opt to leave this information out as well. The question was brief and simple: *Does art education have value for you personally? Please explain.*

The responses were interestingly harmonious with the findings from the younger students in my study. It is noteworthy that the students in the study and my current high school students are from different parts of the state, and share only the “diverse inner city students” status. Some excerpts of the many responses I received follow, with brief reflective thoughts to conclude this article.

- *Art to me is freedom, the ability to become a god of your imagination and creativity...express yourself in a nonviolent way. I do many forms of art from poetry to cooking. Also you express your true feelings and opinions. (12<sup>th</sup> Grade Boy, Special Education Student)*
- *Considering that we have uniforms and everyone looks the same, being in art reminds you to be independent and different...to be your own person and not to be afraid to show it. (Bedreah, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Girl)*
- *Art is timeless and it's what I'll have for a very long time and no one can take it away. (Anonymous 10<sup>th</sup> Grader)*

- *My name is Jasmine Falcon and I think that art should be more than just another elective. Art is as important as any other subject. I think you need art to grow.*(9<sup>th</sup> Grade Girl)
- *I think art is a main subject in school. If people draw they are improving their writing skills and improving their art skills. They have so many styles and artists have accomplished so many things. That's why I love to draw so much because one day I know I will get noticed...* (Jamal, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Boy, Special Education Student)
- *Everywhere you look is art. If I didn't have art in my life it would be worthless and I don't know what I'd do. I think everyone secretly loves art but doesn't try hard enough or think it's important like academic subjects. But it's huge in the world today.* (H.M., 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Girl)
- *Actually I don't think art supports any other core subjects. Art is its own thing! It is a way to express yourself and just have fun. It should definitely be a core subject.* (Wuendy Enriquez Jimenez, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Girl)
- *Art is a way to express yourself. Everyone needs to express themselves in some way. Some sing, some play sports, and some like me put my feelings into art work.* (Mackie, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Girl)
- *I think art has a substantial role in schools on its own, not merely as an elective because, in my opinion, it's a way of expression and it brings me personally to a different place than other subjects can. Not many things can bring me to that place (dancing, pottery & art in general can.)* (Alexis, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Girl)

- *Art gives us an opportunity to be ourselves and explore our creativity, to show who we are.* (Hamida, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Girl)
- *Art's role is to give students a chance to express their free will, ambition, and their inner world.* (Tasnim, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Girl)
- *Art teaches me how life moves, its beauty and how we can capture it.* (Khoa, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Boy)
- *So much can be said in a piece of art. There is power in the stroke of a paintbrush. Many people miss out on expressing themselves completely if they don't have art classes.* (Melissa, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Girl)
- *Kids don't have to be held back in art. When you are doing art you are calm and you become relaxed. The core subjects just make you stressed.* (Anonymous 9th Grader)
- *An art class can help a person realize his or her artistic abilities. There could be a future Van Gogh or Monet in one of those classes, but all that some schools administrators care about is whether kids are passing math and reading tests.* (Megan, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Girl)
- *I don't think any other class can relieve stress like art. Since I have art 1<sup>st</sup> period, it smooths out my day.* (Jeffrey, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Boy)

As is apparent from the students' thoughts presented here, many recurring perceptions about the value of art education emerged from the responses I received. The central notions of art as a vehicle for self-expression, artistic development, and a unique mode for nurturing creativity paralleled the revelations in the research findings for my K-8 participants. I noted a greater emphasis on the value of self-

discovery among my high school students, fitting for the developmental phase of life they are in. All in all, I found the informal follow-up study to serve as an indicator that my conclusions from the findings of the major study may not be specific only to the participants involved in the larger study, but may reflect students' feelings on a more general level.

Further, my own ongoing literary reviews lend support to my theory that the value of art education lies in "art for art's sake" rather than how art serves the testable basic subjects (although the arts continue to be celebrated as support systems for "academic" objectives.) And the focus is shifting toward the art for art's sake stance in major venues where such pedagogy is widely heard and can impact education reform. The National Art Education Association News (*NAEA News*) reported in the February 2008 issue that renowned educators and policymakers attended a national symposium on arts education's relevance in today's schools held at Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Their discussions echoed my viewpoint. The concluding argument was that the arts need to be part of the core curriculum because arts education addresses the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges in that "...it develops capacities to imagine and innovate, abilities necessary in a global economy driven by creative problem solving, flexible thinking, and entrepreneurship" (Perrin, 2008, in *NAEA News*, p.1).

As eloquent as the experts' words at that summit were, I am convinced that arts students convey this reality best, and I will continue to delve into *their* truths as a means of getting to the root of the value of the arts in education.

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