

The Fine Arts in Education: Ensuring that No Child is Left Behind

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Introduction

We are currently living in a new era of public education, one where standardized test scores for students and standardized measurements of teacher accountability move to the forefront of political and household debate. Yearly student measurements, primarily in reading and math, are required to show growth. The high stakes associated with the tests scores trickle down to district resources being primarily directed towards these subjects. These resources, both money and time, are then taken away from the fine arts. At times, “art teachers are encouraged - and sometimes required - to incorporate tested subjects into their curricula” (Chapman, cited in Beveridge, 2010, p. 5). Art isn’t the only subject affected by this change; music, physical education, drama, and any other subject that is not tested by the state stands to lose. This endangers the fine arts and could potentially prevent them “from being recognized as a distinct and separate subject matter with its own skills and concepts” (Gerber & Gerrity, cited in Beveridge, 2010, p. 5).

Much time and money has been devoted to the law and ideas surrounding No Child Left Behind. Since the implementation of this law, instructional time in tested content areas has increased, while decreasing the instructional time in the arts (Beveridge, p.5). I, like Beveridge, wonder “Is our goal simply to get students *to* college, or to help them *succeed* in and graduate from college?” (p. 6). I believe our goal as educators, and as a society at large, is to educate our

youth to be successful problem-solvers in the future. This charge is more challenging and rigorous than a list of standards and assessments that measure only the skills that indicate success “in the most menial tasks and jobs” (Beveridge, p. 6).

As a parent of gifted children, I have a personal interest in keeping the arts in school. My oldest excels in the fine arts. Now that he is transitioning into the middle school, life will have new meaning for him. No longer will he be required to sit through the basic academic classes, with one intervention block devoted to gifted education. In addition to his daily art class, he will now have the opportunity to participate in concert band and jazz band. Should our district decide to reallocate resources, my son would lose that which is challenging him most. No standardized test will show growth for him; we need the arts to continually challenge him, demand more from him, and to develop the sense of success and accomplishment.

As a teacher, I want a well-rounded education for all my students. Beveridge points out that “public school may be the only place where at-risk students can access the arts without having to pay for them” (p. 6). I teach in a school with a free and reduced lunch rate around the 40% mark. This means that about half of my class would not have access to the arts if the opportunity did not exist in school. Many studies support the notion that fine arts contribute to the overall achievement of an individual. When we “marginalize all nontested subjects, we create a system in which only the most affluent members of our society have access to the most comprehensive and well-rounded education, which widens the achievement gap, rather than close it” (p. 6).

Research & Best Practices

As a 1st grade, self-contained teacher, I am, for the present time, only peripherally involved with standardized tests. There is no formal test administered to my students, and I am not currently involved in linkage. However, the backmapping of scores brings out correlations between passage on third grade tests to first grade quarterly diagnostic scores. This means that much time and energy is spent discussing, problem solving, and implementing interventions for kids below benchmark scores. Interestingly enough, though, rarely is the intervention ‘more time with core curriculum’ an acceptable option. Perhaps it’s time to expand the core and give kids more time exploring and connecting to their own learning.

My notion of expanding the core means that we more fully integrate the arts into our everyday curriculum. I am fortunate to be teaching in a school where children receive one hour of instruction per week in each of art, music, and PE. I have noticed, though, that no longer does the primary wing of the school smell like paint and glue. It appears that even in the non-tested grades, the shift of resources towards tested content areas is encroaching on our day. I’m not suggesting that we throw out high expectations for glue, paint, and pianos, but perhaps it’s time to reflect on current research and modify teaching practices before it’s too late and the art of teaching is nothing more than a distant memory.

Reading and language development is a primary focus in first grade instruction. Research by Shirley Brice Heath and Shelby Wolf has shown that the arts are critical for language development in young children and sustained focus and attack skills in other academic areas. The goal of Heath and Wolf’s research (2005) was to work with students and schools in a creative manner to develop “not just a creative spark that would soon fade, but sustained learning by children who could continue thinking, assessing and working for life-wide creative learning”

(p. 38). The underlying framework for this research was that children would be consulted, included in the planning of projects, and included “as thinkers in the joint work of the group” (p. 39). Through this collaboration, the students knew they were valued. In turn, they took great care in preparing their work, knowing that it would be displayed.

Imagine a classroom, not just an art program, that worked primarily under this premise. By placing the responsibility of learning on the child, we ensure continual learning. Students who are motivated by their own desires and interests have a “spark” for learning that will not fade at the end of the unit, term, or school year. My students are always more engaged when they are clearly teaching me something, rather than listening to me. They are excited to share new ideas, cultural connections, and ask questions as we learn together.

The need for kids to read at earlier ages has negatively impacted reading comprehension. In recent years, my first grade colleagues and I have noticed a trend where the high decoders can not comprehend the readings. Word recall without comprehension is NOT reading; Rose, Parks, Androes, and McMahon (2001) propose that drama be incorporated into the language arts classroom as a way to improve reading comprehension. Bell’s work, mentioned by Rose, et al., suggests “that those who comprehend clearly what they are able to read are able to visualize the scenes they have read” (p. 56). Bell further claims that “strong readers can visualize the details of a story assembled as a whole rather than try to hold onto the many parts separately” (p. 56). The connection between visualization and drama is a natural fit; “if imagery is an effective tool for enhancing reading comprehension, then drama-based techniques that draw on the importance of visualization and imaging also may be effective methods for teaching reading” (p. 57). The connection is clear; as educators, we need to be teaching children to visualize rather than recall. While this teaching method may seem to run counter to the current movement of cramming

information for recall that will show student and teacher growth, this delivery model produces the best results. At the conclusion of this study, “the impact of drama-based instruction on reading comprehension included improvements in both standardized test scores and a performance assessment” (p. 62).

In addition to academic growth, first grade is also a critical time for social growth. While there are many programs districts can purchase and teachers can implement as direct instruction for social development, the best answer is to go back to the notion of expanding the core and infusing arts education into the daily curriculum. Briouillette (2010) proves that experiences with the arts “help children to develop an enhanced understanding of the responses, emotional expressions, and actions of other people, as well as a comprehension of what to expect from other and what social scripts should be used in different situations” (p. 16). The arts aid in social development because they typically involved collaborative tasks; “successful engagement in activities such as group singing, dancing, and dramatic play requires sharing, taking turns, and subordinating individual urges to the intentions of the group” (p. 18). Throughout these group collaborations, “children learn initiative, leadership, and respect for others’ ideas, as well as the reality that they cannot have their own way all of the time” (p. 18). When students learn social skills through the arts, they are able to apply the skills immediately and directly; a lecture or direct instruction method is removed from the learner and is less likely to lead to application outside of the modeled situation.

Incorporating arts education also leads to a more culturally responsive classroom. Because of the performance-based interactions with the arts, children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds have “an outlet for self-expression that was less dependent on ... English language

vocabulary” (Brouillette, 2010, p. 20). This entry point into the classroom of learners is personally important in my school, where we have a significant ESL population.

Conclusion

I commend my district for supporting weekly instruction from an arts specialist, but I need to do more. It is clear to me that the best education I can provide for my students is to integrate the arts into our daily curriculum. To that end, the art teacher and I have collaborated on an interdisciplinary unit for next year. The idea behind our project is based on the European Muuvit program that I piloted in the spring of 2012. Throughout this program, students will track physical fitness as a way to earn mileage to travel around the world. While en route to each new city, students will study the culture of the area.

We know from Dewey’s research that art education is “a foundational part of the curriculum because it develop(s) creativity, self-expression, and an appreciation of the expression of others” (Dewey, cited in Heilig, Cole, & Aguilar, 2010, p.136). In my classroom, I want my students to be creative, express themselves, and respect and appreciate what others bring to our classroom. This creativity, expression, and respect ultimately leads to a culturally responsive classroom. We know from Terrell & Lindsey (2009) that “culture includes all characteristics of human description” (p. 16). This culture includes everything from age and gender to ethnicity and race (p. 16). By studying a variety of places, we begin to address the ethnic and racial diversity in our world. When we personalize the study in our classroom and challenge the students to reflect, share, comment, and compare their own culture to another, we begin to see many differences amongst our own cultures in the classroom, discover similarities throughout the world, and develop an understanding for all who inhabit the earth.

I am excited to implement this program; I believe it incorporates the arts, culture, and academics through meaningful and engaging learning opportunities, while upholding the rigor and demands of academic excellence without devolving into the assessment and accountability trap that undermines our professionalism and integrity. Beveridge states, “If we continue as if NCLB is just a trend that will disappear in a few years, we may turn today’s short term effects into tomorrow’s long-term problems. And, in the meantime, how many children will we leave behind?” (p. 6-7). I hope we stand united, incorporate arts into our school with proper funding and instruction, and thus, leave no child behind.

References

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