

Room
13
Inquiry

Making Room for the Arts
Essay by Jessica Hoffmann Davis, EdD

Ask young artists why they do what they do—why they throw themselves with such gusto into a fresh slab of clay, move their fingers so rapidly through thick layers of finger paint, or lose themselves in a dance or a play and they will tell you that it is fun. “You can express yourself and be creative, you know, have fun.” As a student of artistic expression and creativity in *Room 13 Inquiry*, the child artist’s clear and simple response amuses and inspires. Fun. Why else? The pleasure children derive from artistic activity is on the one hand the heart of the matter, and on the other, beyond the point. Because fun is a word that educators too frequently think of as extraneous. The work of school; the fun of play. While art teachers will proudly tell you that fun and play prevail in their classrooms, arts education advocates fear those words as tickets to extracurricular status—to the “yes, but” of relegating the arts to out of school locations and time.

But why should it be otherwise? Why should the arts be prioritized in our children’s education? This is a question asked year after year as stressed

administrators deal with the constraints of budget and time. More than any other subject the arts are constantly asked to justify their worth to those arbitrators of curriculum who determine what our children will learn in school. As an advocate for arts education for over half a century, I have witnessed these justifications change repeatedly and in response to the varying priorities of mainstream education.

When I was a child in the 1940's, it was thought that making and understanding art would help me grow into a whole person capable of expressing myself and having empathy for others. These outcomes were valued in the progressive era. In the 1950's, in response to the launching of the first artificial satellite, there was a rush for science education and the arts began to be classified as "nice but not necessary." In the decades that have ensued since, reflecting different trends in pedagogy and psychology, arts education has been promoted as contributing to an extremely wide range of outcomes. These include: 1) the development of cognitive skills that feature critical thinking and habits of mind such as the ability to self-start and self-regulate; 2) the acquisition of personal and interpersonal skills ranging from increased self-esteem to the ability to lead and/or collaborate; 3) as a means to improve learning in non-arts (i.e. more important) subjects, raise IQs, and boost scores on standardized tests; and 4) as a means to increase school attendance and reduce the drop out rate (Davis, 2012). And although this roster may seem far-reaching if not even far-fetched, arts educators have risen to the fashions of the time and the arts in their infinite breadth and

flexibility have been able, occasionally even with measurable results, to provide.

Against this tide of mainstream rationales, I have long argued that the arts should be taught not for what they do in service to other subjects or extraneous goals, but for the arts-related objectives that other subjects do not specifically address. My research and experience on this topic inform a manifesto that is aimed at this sort of strength-based arts education advocacy (2008). In it, I delineate what I have found to be the features and educational outcomes of arts learning (making work oneself and making sense of the work of others) that distinguish its reach and essentiality (and see 2014). Let me briefly introduce these observations here.

A product. First of all, arts' learning concerns a tangible product— a something we can hear or read or view that was not there before the artist conceived and constructed it. Whether it is a play or a poem or an original musical composition, there is a produced object at the center of our learning in and about the arts. In the creation of their own work and in their understanding of the art works of others, students must apply and develop the ability to *imagine*. To think beyond the given to what philosophers have called the “what if” (Greene, 1995). What if I move my arm jerkily, how will that affect my dance performance? What if I add a bright yellow background to this drawing, how will it change the mood? At the center of this imagining is the maker of art—the student—whose decisions determine the outcome of the work. And that important decision-making and execution help students realize their own mattering or efficacy.

Arts' learning teaches children about *imagination* and *agency*.

Expression. Secondly, works of art express emotion. It is true that in a painting, play, dance, or piece of music we can learn about the history of a period or the fashion of a time. But in ways that other human constructs do not, works of art embody and convey emotion. On this account, students who study the arts learn to recognize and give shape to their own feelings by expressing themselves through artistic production. Further, students learn to acknowledge and find meaning in others' emotions as they strive to make sense of timeless works of art and/or works made by their peers. The arts, as other subjects may not at all, teach our children about *expression* and *empathy*.

Ambiguity. Works of art are not clear-cut in their meaning the way that words and numbers can be. Works of art invite multiple understandings—understandings that change with different individuals and eras. Non-arts subjects may introduce students to precise distinctions such as the measurable difference between a city block and a country mile. But the arts teach students about ambiguity—about the way the city block and country mile can alternatively or both be filled with hope or fear. Because the arts are ambiguous, arts learning introduces our children to *interpretation*—to the ability to fashion multiple understandings out of a single work of art. And with the acquisition of skills of sense making in art comes the realization that others' sense making can be both different from and as

valid as one's own. Beyond the black and white of right and wrong, in the multi-faceted gray of interpretation, lies respect for a variety of points of view. Arts learning teaches our children *interpretation* and *respect*.

Process. Both the creation of a work of art and the making sense of another's work is an ongoing process. The arts are famously process-oriented. Educators have taken an interest in the portfolios of artists as vehicles for collecting and reviewing student work over time. Some educators argue that student folios should be called "processfolios" and that their most important goal is the acquisition of skills of self-assessment, the ability to explain why something was done and to consider its effectiveness (Gardner, 1989). The process orientation of works of art invites our students into a conversation around real questions—questions that do not have right or wrong answers but may lead to new questions that propel the progress both of the making of a work and the understanding of works by others. Arts' learning teaches our children about *inquiry* and *reflection*.

Connection. Last, implicit in works of art in all media is a connection between artists and audiences across time and circumstance. Once a student has made a drawing or taken a photograph, she will see drawings and photographs in galleries in a new light. She will feel a connection with the artists who created the work and with the subjects they represent. When a student has the privilege of working along side of an artist in residence, this connection is enriched and expanded. When a student has experienced the joy of being part of an ensemble, he will understand the connection that comes from co-creating a performance piece.

Participation in a functioning studio space, such as *Room 13 Inquiry*, provides students with a range of life skills connected to the world of art as a valued and viable arena. The sense of engagement that making and sharing perpetuates extends beyond the moment of performance or the encounter in the gallery to a profound realization of one's own humanity as it is manifest and experienced through art—one's own participation in the cultural landscape. And with that comes, as we so often see in the powerful social commentary that artists provide, a sense of responsibility to each other and to the broader scene of humankind. Artistic connection introduces our students to *engagement* with a world of others and to our *responsibility* thereto.

With apologies to the child artist I mentioned at the start, I realize that the word "fun" has not appeared in my list of attributes of arts learning. But in so far as heightened awareness and engagement awaken us to invention and surprise, fun undoubtedly resonates throughout. Like the art teachers who accurately describe the busy often-noisy joyful environments in which they teach, artful educators in all subjects strive for fun—learning is fun; discovery is fun; turning our thoughts into things is a lot of fun. Let's not mislead our students into thinking there is one fixed trajectory for education; teaching and learning is an adventure filled with risk and surprise.

In a sea of standardization, surrounded by the perils of right and wrong answers, good and bad, black and white, let us turn to the arts to remind our children that the world is filled with curves where you expect angles and sunshine

where you had thought shade. The varied colors and movements and sounds that shape the arts provide our students with a vocabulary for making meaning where words alone may fail. Intensive and sustained study of the arts will make our students available to closer attention and richer understanding of all aspects of their education and their lives.

References

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Jessica Hoffmann Davis writes about the role and promise of the arts in the lives of children and young people. This essay was gifted by Jessica Hoffmann Davis to *Room 13 Inquiry* in 2017. jessicahoffmandavis.com

Room 13 Inquiry is an art studio programme in Fingal, north county Dublin. Initiated by Fingal County Council's Arts Office in 2014, it currently exists in two primary schools - Scoil Bhride Cailini NS with artist Orla Kelly, and Tyrrelstown Educate Together NS with artist Anne Cradden.

For more information on *Room 13 Inquiry* please contact Julie Clarke, Youth & Education Officer, Fingal Arts Office, julie.clarke@fingal.ie www.fingalarts.ie

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