



Why Middle School Art Matters

Teachers and leaders must work to ensure that all students receive the best education possible—and that includes a comprehensive, balanced, and sequential program of visual arts instruction for every student in every middle school.

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We affirm our faith in the power of the visual arts to enrich the lives and endeavors of humankind. In a highly technological society such as ours, the visual arts serve as a humanizing force, giving dignity and a sense of worth to the individual.

—The Constitution of the National Art Education Association

In his best-selling book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, Daniel Pink writes: “The future belongs to a different kind of person with a different kind of mind: artists, inventors, storytellers—creative and holistic “right-brain” thinkers whose abilities mark the fault line between who gets ahead and who doesn’t.” Pink goes on to write that art is the single most important class that students can take because the art class is one of the few places in school where creativity is taught.

A recent study by Winner and Hetland (2007) revealed “a remarkable array of mental habits” that students learn in the art classroom that are not emphasized in other areas of the school curriculum. They include visual-spatial abilities, reflection, self-criticism, and the willingness to experiment and learn from their mistakes. These are some of the important skills needed in today’s workplace that are not being addressed by No Child Left Behind or by high-stakes testing.

Creativity and innovation are two skills that are inherent in a quality visual arts program. Unlike language arts and math, which usually have only one correct answer, “the arts teach children that problems can have more than one solution and that questions can have more than one answer” (Eisner, 1985). In addition to the knowledge and skills learned in the making of art, students also learn to think in new and different ways. According to Hetland et al., “the kinds of thinking developed by the arts are important in and among themselves, as important as the thinking developed in more traditionally academic subjects.”

Our nation’s middle schools are facing one of the most challenging times in their history. Schools are being inundated with concerns from the public and private sectors regarding low performance and the ever-increasing dropout rate. School violence is at an all-time high. And according to the U.S. Census Bureau, America has never had so many children entering school with little or no English skills, with one out of every five children coming from a limited English-speaking family.

A Universal Language

While creating a positive learning environment and keeping students in school are both extremely important, the arts are essential because of the value they bring to us as human beings. They teach us who we are and where we have been. Without exception, every culture has left artifacts that help us know who they were and how they lived. From cave paintings and Greek sculptures to Egyptian pyramids and Native American pottery, art tells us how different civilizations have lived and worked.

The arts are the first language of young children—telling us about their development and response to their world. Babies coo and imitate their mother’s singing of lullabies; and scribbling is a normal part of every child’s early development. Young children are naturally inquisitive and imaginative. They are not afraid to ask questions and they frequently invent stories that represent their own view of the world. They are uninhibited when they talk about their artwork and the work of others.

Sadly, most learning in art stops around the sixth grade, which is why many adults say they can't draw. They stopped learning at one of the most important turning points in their lives. Marilyn Stewart, a professor of art education at Kutztown University, said it this way: "Middle school is a fork in the road. If students don't get it [art education] there—they will totally miss out."

Often in an effort to improve language arts and math skills for at-risk students, middle-level administrators substitute remedial classes for art and music classes. Sadly, these are often the students who most benefit from substantive art programs.

Because art is a universal language, students from all cultural and economic backgrounds can find a home in the art classroom. When students are enthusiastic about learning, they are more likely to come to school and to stay in school. Educators must find ways for all students to have multiple opportunities for success.

Have you ever visited a middle school that has been distinguished as a National Blue Ribbon School or a School of Excellence? In such schools the arts flourish, students are actively involved and excited about learning, and teachers and students alike enjoy coming to school. The arts create a positive and inviting learning environment—resulting in higher attendance rates and fewer dropout rates. Quality visual arts programs are often at the hub of outstanding middle schools.

According to the National Middle School Association (1995), one of the major components of an exemplary middle school program is varied instruction, which focuses on four key attributes:

- Integrating learning experiences, addressing students' own questions, and focusing upon real-life issues relevant to the student;
- Actively engaging students in problem-solving and accommodating individual differences;
- Emphasizing collaboration, cooperation, and community; and
- Seeking to develop good people who care for others and have democratic values and moral sensitivity.

Each of these attributes aligns closely with the basic components of a quality visual arts program. In his book, *The Arts and Creation of Mind*, Eisner (2002) identified some of the important skills taught in the visual arts classroom. They include flexibility, expression, imagination, and the ability to shift direction. In a research study conducted in art classrooms through Harvard University's Project Zero, Hetland et al. (2007) observed and identified Eight Studio Habits of Mind. In addition to developing craft through technique and studio practice, these habits or "dispositions" include observation, envisioning, reflecting, expressing, exploring, engaging and persisting, and understanding the art world.

Why does middle-level art matter? Learning and innovation skills will help to ensure that our students are prepared for increasingly complex life and work environments in the 21st century. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (www.21stcenturyskills.org), these skills include creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving, and communication and collaboration.

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