

The Power of Arts in Education: Providing a Healthy, Well-Rounded Education

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Abstract

Music educators are continually challenged to provide solid reasons to keep or increase funding in the school budget for music education. Supporting tenants usually include the fact that music activities can increase neural transmitters in the brain or that music students are using the same lines of reasoning needed for math and reading skills. However, many other school subjects can provide those effects, so it may be wise for music educators to include in their platform the effects which music and the arts alone are able to provide. The arts should comprise a core part in education, not just because they enhance objective, rational subjects by helping children focus and grow cognitive skills, but also because they provide an the objective, aesthetic component that is both positive and necessary for the child's emotional growth and development and is not available in other school subjects.

Keywords: Aesthetic experiences, Maslow's hierarchy, artistic knowing, well-rounded education.

When the new ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) was signed into law on December 10, 2016, music educators were hopeful at the possibilities that arts education might find a new prominence and additional funding under the hood of the Act's promised "well-rounded" education clause. Since that time, it seems little has changed to enhance support of the arts in education. Unless music educators step up to be heard or they define how music education fits into the ESSA law, and are heard, nothing is likely to improve in music funding.

What the law actually states is that school districts receiving more than \$30,000 of federal money will be required to spend at least 20% of that funding on at least one activity to help students become well-rounded, with another 20% on one or more activities that help students be safe and healthy. Some of that money may be spent on technology. If music educators make their case for arts to be granted part of that funding based solely on the fact that arts help provide a well-rounded education, they may not win the desired dollars. Too many other competing subjects, such as computer technology and foods classes arise as options for completing a "well-rounded" education. If music educators also make the case that music education provides each child with an aesthetic component that promotes good emotional and physical health in a way that no other school subject can do, they may make some headway toward gaining the desired funding.

First of all, the case needs to be made that students need to experience aesthetics to round out their education. Aesthetic experiences allow children to develop and express their changing emotions in a positive way, promoting emotional and mental health. Aesthetic experiences also provide opportunities for children to participate in their growth as both rational and emotive humans beings. These experiences invite children to

slow down to enjoy things around them that are rich, beautiful, comical, and thought-provoking. This will help them to develop as caring beings that are both self-aware and aware of things and persons around them. If growth mindset intelligence could be considered the hinge needed to open the door to more advanced learning, then aesthetic experiences could be considered the oil that allows the hinge to freely swing open that door of new learning experiences. Children learn better and are more curious when they are happy and healthy. As aesthetic experiences provide the release of negative emotions and the expression of new positive emotions, these unique human experiences help children learn without negative emotions obstructing their progress.

According to the Doane University Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning website, 2016, aesthetics allow the developing child to experience seven things:

- i. the power of a work of art to transform children and teachers
- ii. the partnership of student and teacher sharing insights
- iii. the challenge of taking risks to ask open-ended questions
- iv. the excitement of learning to express oneself in new ways
- v. the self-esteem gained from experiences that teach self-respect and mutual respect
- vi. the exploration of a broad range of human relationships
- vii. the opportunity to combine mind and emotion, cognition and sensory experience, analysis and intuition toward understanding something as a whole

Arts education is unique to the school system because students experience aesthetics in education primarily through the arts classes. Music and Art are the only

classes offered in our public schools for which aesthetic experience is a stated objective in the curriculum, and in which the main purpose is to allow students to experience their work aesthetically. Arts classes allow the child to experience creativity as individuals, and as part of a larger whole. The child's personal artistic experiences are real, enriching, and fulfilling. Group artistic experiences move the children to an entire new level as they collaborate with or watch other artists.

Educators rightly believe that every child will learn better when provided with better teaching and testing, but will every child reach his or her potential with good teaching alone? According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, probably not. If the child is hungry and needs food for *physiological needs* (Maslow level 1), schools provide free and reduced lunches. If the child needs *safety* (Maslow level 2), the schools provide "safe schools" plans and offers social services specific to the child's needs. The school hires teachers who set goals to help every child feel *loved and accepted* (Maslow level 3). When students' needs have been satisfied up to Maslow's level 3, they are no longer distracted by lack of the basic needs, and they are now able to begin learning. However, the students will need the help of aesthetics to achieve optimum learning. Aesthetics are the best means to provide every child the opportunity to move up Maslow's hierarchy into *esteem* (Maslow level 4) and *self-actualization* (Maslow level 5). For that reason, the schools should be providing arts education for every student. Schools should not pull students from their arts classes to enroll them in remedial or advanced classes. Although the student may advance in the remedial skills or advanced class, the time required to do so could possibly be cut significantly if the child was experiencing aesthetic education and achieving movement into the higher levels of Maslow's hierarchy. The aesthetic arts

provide what the student needs to achieve self-confidence and freedom leading into self-actualization. Since self-actualization is the realm in which the student finds inner health and is fully alive, compassionate, and able to be task-centered, helping students achieve this level of Maslow's hierarchy should be a part of our educational goals. Schools encouraging community service as a 21st-Century skill could welcome a goal such as this.

What will be the long-term effects if public schools continue to cut or limit aesthetic education course offerings to students? The lack of aesthetic education in public schools can be a contributor to student immaturity and behavioral problems. As today's students come to school from homes that are increasingly more stressful, less secure, less structured, and in some cases, less safe, teachers are finding themselves referring more students for counseling and other support systems. At the same time, teachers are held to higher academic learning standards for their students. When the aesthetic education component is not available for the students, the teacher's job can become intrinsically more difficult and more time-consuming.

In their book, Foundations of Expressive Arts Therapy: Theoretical and Clinical Perspectives (1999), Ellen Levine and Stephen K. Levine propose that children who are denied aesthetic learning and growth during their education years are at risk of graduating as immature, unknowing citizens. They also reference Pat Allen, author of Art is a Way of Knowing, who indicates that there is a difference between artistic knowing and intellectual knowing. They include M. C. Richards' definition of "artistic knowing," as "an underground river that gives us life and mobility." Arts therapists have found that the human psyche more genuinely expresses itself through images than words. These images may be in motion, sound, or in dramatic action. Arts education, then, is the natural tool

to help the student properly develop and grow in the affective domain, thus providing a needed and otherwise missing aesthetic component for a well-rounded education. Levine also refers to Danish Theologian and philosopher, K. E. Logstrup, who believes that our ethical interpretation of the world comes from our poetic experiences. In a post-modern world where ethics is no longer a set of fixed boundaries, the hope for a humanity in which each person defines his or her own rules without historic context could rise or fall based on what the new ethics context may become. Logstrup suggests that the post-modern society might be able to continue in love, sharing, kindness, and generosity by providing and promoting positive aesthetic experiences for each person.

Interestingly, singing is especially important as an aesthetic art, because arts therapists note that humans perceive the voice almost as strongly as the sense of touch, identifying themselves and others in terms of the emotions the voice projects; a person's self-perception through the voice can become negatively fixed from an early age. Music teachers tap into this very personal and vulnerable arena when they invite children into new, positive, aesthetic vocal experiences. Vocal teachers influence or reinforce the child's self-perceptions and help each student grow and navigate more smoothly through his or her changing voice. The Levines found that students who hate the sound of their own voices may be reacting to very negative past experiences. A music teacher who helps a child find his or her singing voice can break through barriers to free a child into finding Maslow's *safety* level. Positive vocal training is invaluable to students as they navigate through adolescence. Vocal educators understand that the student's changing voice may be very provocative in the beginning, and the vocal teacher can create a safe, healthy place of growth in ways no other teacher in the building can.

For students who have difficulty focusing, the arts offer what philosophers call "aesthetic emotion," a nomenclature for the phenomenon of the way the brain is activated and engaged during aesthetic activity or appreciation. Studies have shown that when art forms are combined, as when a subject views visual arts while listening to music and experiencing changing lights, the brain stays more engaged. The National Society for Biotechnology Information at the U.S. National Library of Medicine indicates that the average attention span of a human being is now only eight seconds long, which is one second less than that of a goldfish. In contrast, Jackson (2010) notes that psychologists' research from Canada and also from York University found that trained musicians are better than the general public at task-switching and efficient global processing (seeing the forest for the trees). It stands to reason that trained musicians are receiving regular doses of task-switching processing skills, more commonly known as multi-tasking, and both global processing skills (seeing the whole score) and local (seeing the notes and symbols in the score). They also exhibit high processing skills in nearly every rehearsal. For this reason, music education provides students with regular training in an aesthetic endeavor that creatively engages their minds, while the students also train in focused thinking skills.

With this information, where should music educators position themselves in the ESSA funding request line-up? Music educators must promote what their instruction includes that other classes don't offer: a true aesthetic education for our students. Music and arts should be offered to every child in our nations schools, uninterrupted by SOL remedial classes or advanced placement classes. This is primarily because of the extremely important aesthetic component that only arts classes provide for students. If we are to graduate students who are healthy emotionally and are able to care for the

world around them as good citizens, able to learn and achieve at their highest potential, and able to “know” intellectually and artistically, then schools need to include aesthetic education. The education curriculum can truly offer a well-rounded, healthy education when every student is given classroom time to develop skills in an aesthetic setting where the self-actualization stage is reached as a valued part of the curriculum.

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