

The National Kindergarten Alliance speaks out for

## Art in the Classroom

"I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand"

~ Confucius

The fine arts are of great importance to children's development and need to be an integral part of the total school experience for young learners. Visual Arts, Music, Dance and Drama are key elements of the fine arts curriculum.

This document will focus on the role of visual arts in the lives of five and six year olds. The use of visual arts to extend and enrich core curriculum in today's kindergartens is being constrained by:

- \* academic pressures set by standards-based curricula
- \* economic limitations within district budgets
- \* expectations by parents and community businesses for high test scores in traditional academic subjects
- \* assumptions that art is extracurricular and non-essential

The purpose of this informational paper is to help kindergarten teachers understand that in many successful classrooms children are instructed not about art, but through art. Neuro-scientist Kenneth Wesson has said "Exciting new research consistently indicates a strong cor-relation between the arts , cognitive development and academic success. Quality programs - teach not only art, but other life-long skills, such as visualization, spatial reasoning and fine motor skills" (Lynch, p.1) Additional research supporting Wesson's conclusion includes a national study of 25,000 students conducted by the Education Commission of the States which found that students "with high levels of arts-learning experiences earned higher grades and scored better on standardized tests than those with little or no involvement in the arts" (Venegas-Chavez, p.4)

Research conducted by Michelle M. Guilbeau-Sheppard has also revealed that "art education aids the brain in actually rewiring itself to make stronger neural connections and more neural connections" (Guilbeau-Sheppard, p. 1) As neuroscientist Marian Diamond has discovered, class room environments in which students are passive observers are counter-productive to learning and retention while those in which students participate in hands-on activities are extremely conducive to creating neural connections that foster concept mastery, problem-solving skills, and retention of information. (Dickinson, p. 5)

In addition to academic and neurological functions, artists and educational experts have noted a wide variety of valuable educational experiences fostered by art activities. Following is a discussion of benefits to learners when art is integrated in and through the curriculum.

**Art Disciplines.** Children master techniques requiring skill, patience and attention by practicing with art mediums. Arranging the tiny pieces of mosaics, for example, or pushing, pulling and smoothing clay to make recognizable forms requires young children to practice great concentration and precision.

"The older I get and the more I master the medium,  
the more I return to my earliest experiences.  
I think that at the end of my life I will recover all the force of my childhood."  
~ Joan Miró, master Artist

**Art reflects nature.** An awareness of the environment brings elements of the outdoors into the classroom. Child artists are inspired by the pattern and beauty of nature. The foundation for a healthy lifelong relationship with the natural world is built upon the ability to recognize the value of natural materials and to reflect upon experiences with nature.

"I always entreat the good Lord to give me my childhood back,  
- to grant that I may see nature and render it like a child without prejudice."  
~ Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Master Artist

**Art Heals.** The artistic process provides many therapeutic benefits. Developing tactile skills, refining motor coordination and experiencing texture and form extend aesthetic and physical senses. Given the time to explore and create without the fear of failure, children are enabled in acknowledging their unique talents.

"Art teaches effective communication and opens the door to an entire world of nonverbal forms of communication that carry powerful messages in our culture and others."

"Art fosters creativity, which is the growth of individual competence and achievement in learning to express thoughts, feelings, values in visual form."

"Art education nourishes the idea that life's important problems have more than one answer and that a variety of solutions may be created -"  
~ National Endowment for the Arts

When Howard Gardner recognized that learners internalize concepts through a variety of strategies, he highlighted the need for hands-on experiences as a creative supplement to scripted textbook learning. The use of art activities motivates students, increases their interest and adds meaning and purpose to subject area goals. It is incumbent upon today's educators to recognize the value of and utilize artistic experiences to extend and enrich the core curriculum and improve educational outcomes for all learners.

Pianist Daniel Barenboim had said, "Every great work of art has two faces, one toward its own time and one toward the future."

**Art empowers.** Imagination nourishes creativity, encourages risk-taking and builds critical thinking capabilities that develop problem solving skills. Self-esteem grows as the child artist begins to take control of processes, materials and resulting products.

"Tomorrow's scientists and engineers need grounding in the arts to stimulate their curiosity and creativity - to help them perceive the world in new and different ways.  
We can begin by realizing that art and science are of a piece;

the methods differ but the game is the same."

~ Morris Tanenbaum, CEO, AT&T

"Newton's apple and Cezanne's apple are discoveries more closely related than they seem."

~ Arthur Koestler, author

**Art awakens wonder.** The child artist experiences a new way of seeing everything. It is through experimentation and observation that children find delight in their own place in the world around them and learn to appreciate the work of others.

"As educators, we have the responsibility to educate  
and inspire the whole child – mind, heart and soul."

~ Steven Wolk, author, "Joy in School"

**Art communicates.** For young children, a picture is worth a thousand words. To be able to paint about one's feelings, observations or thoughts provides a freedom of expression that encourages confidence and clarity. Art is a language all its own.

"Art is and has been a part of every culture. Before written communication  
was developed, art existed as a means of communication.

In today's multicultural classrooms, language differences are a challenge.

Art, however, is a universal language."

~ Cindy Tuisku, Kindergarten teacher

"I found that I could say things with color and shapes  
that I has no words for."

~ Georgia O'Keeffe, artist

**Art connects.** When children are able to experience the unique aspects of their ethnic backgrounds, diverse cultures and histories through art they are engaging in their own artistic traditions as well as those of other cultures.

"... the arts can engage diverse learners  
and provide them with opportunities to share what they know."

~ Christine Goodheart, Director of Initiatives, K-12 Arts Education  
Office of Educational Partnerships, University of Washington

**Art humanizes.** Art can bring people together. When children work with partners to create class quilts or murals, or have their art displayed in public venues, a sense of community is created and shared spaces are enhanced.

"Our support provides young people with opportunities to achieve their potential  
which would otherwise be unavailable to them. At the same time, we are

helping to build the foundation for a brighter future for our entire community!"

~ Joseph H. Lemieux, Owens-Illinois Chairman and CEO

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### TEN LESSONS THE ARTS TEACH

1. The arts teach children to make good judgments about qualitative relationships. Unlike much of the curriculum in which correct answers and rules prevail, in the arts, it is judgment rather than rules that prevail.
2. The arts teach children that problems can have more than one solution and that questions can have more than one answer.
3. The arts celebrate multiple perspectives. One of their large lessons is that there are many ways to see and interpret the world.
4. The arts teach children that in complex forms of problem-solving, purposes are seldom fixed, but change with circumstance and opportunity. Learning in the arts requires the ability and a willingness to surrender to the unanticipated possibilities of the work as it unfolds.
5. The arts make vivid the fact that neither words in literal form nor number can exhaust what we can know. The limits of our language do not define the limits of our cognition.
6. The arts teach students that small differences can have large effects. The arts traffic in subtleties.
7. The arts teach students to think through and within a material. All art forms employ some means through which images become real.
8. The arts help children to say what cannot be said. When children are invited to disclose what a work of art helps them feel, they must reach into their poetic capacities to find the words that will do the job.
9. The arts enable us to have experience we can have from no other source and through such experience to discover the range and variety of what we are capable of feeling.
10. The arts' position in the school curriculum symbolizes to the young what adults believe is important.

For further examination of lessons the arts teach see Elliot Eisner's book *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* published by Yale University Press. 2006. National Art Education Association (NAEA) Publications grants reprint permission for this excerpt from *Ten Lessons* with proper acknowledgment of its source and NAEA.

### **Resources**

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6. Venegas-Chavez, Adriana B. "Experimental School Poised to Open with Promise and Problems" *Watt Way Digital Magazine*. Winter 2009. Volume V. [http://wattwayuscannerberg.org/ee/index/php/vol15\\_stories](http://wattwayuscannerberg.org/ee/index/php/vol15_stories)