

Research for Teachers

May 2011



"This article is one of a series intended to help ETFO members become more aware of current research findings directly relevant to teaching in elementary schools."

5 WHY THE ARTS MATTER

Dr. Rena Uptis
Queen's University

Experiences in the arts spark creativity and nurture the imagination. Imagination and creativity are hallmarks of great thinkers; many prominent scientists are also active in the arts. When a young student writes a poem, choreographs a dance, takes part in theatre, or composes a piece of music, the student, too, has a chance to create, to wonder, and to learn.

Many teachers are aware that the arts can be key in reaching students who do not respond well to traditional forms of learning. The arts also help students analyze complex issues from multiple perspectives. There is mounting evidence that the arts develop critical thinking skills, contribute to self-confidence, encourage risk-taking, and bolster achievement in other subjects. In a study involving over 600,000 students in Georgia (USA), it was found that when school districts made the arts a priority, students had higher test scores and were more likely to graduate from college. A longitudinal Pan-Canadian study offered complementary results: after three years of arts-based programming, Grade 6 students performed better than their peers in non-arts schools on math computation tests. Studies like these tell us that one art form isn't better than any other: what matters is that teachers engage their students in arts activities in regular and sustained ways.

We often hear that the Canadian workforce requires employees to think creatively, to communicate well, to adapt to change, and to learn throughout their careers. An education rich in the arts lays the groundwork for those skills to emerge. Regions with thriving arts programs benefit by job creation, the development of community networks, increased responsiveness of public service organizations, and better quality of life for people in poor health. In these indirect ways, too, the arts are a vital part of our culture.

Much excitement has also been generated by research on brain development. For example, the brain contains specialized neurons that respond to musical stimuli, leading scientists to conclude children's earliest experiences should include music. But even though we learn more easily in the early years, people learn at all ages. When we become lifelong learners in the arts, we have opportunities to develop to our full potential. Elementary teachers can provide such opportunities by setting up permanent arts centres (for listening, sketching and drawing, puppetry), incorporating arts into routines (e.g., music for transitions, inviting parent-artist guests on a monthly basis), and creating larger works (e.g., class quilts, choreographed dance movement

routines for daily physical activity, and school-wide annual productions). The importance of the arts is also clearly evident to children in classrooms filled with visually arresting images, beautiful sounds, and a sense of playfulness and activity. Teachers who create the feeling of an art studio or a workshop give their students the sense new things can be discovered and created in the classroom.

Bertrand Russell was one of the greatest mathematicians and philosophers of the 20th century. In his last essay, written at the age of 95, Russell reflected that the time had come to ask whether his life's work had taught men and women not to hate people other than their own. The final lines of his final essay state: "There is an artist imprisoned in each one of us. Let [the artist] loose to spread joy everywhere." Why did Russell attach such importance to the arts? Perhaps it was the simple fact that the arts enrich our lives. Or perhaps he had come to realize that the arts have formed a fundamental component of culture since the beginning of time - and that everything we think, feel, or know cannot be described by words alone.

Further Reading

Bruer, J. (1999). *The myth of the first three years: A new understanding of early brain development and lifelong learning*. New York: Free Press.

Deasy, R. J. (2002). *Critical links: Learning in the arts and student academic and social development*. Washington, DC: Arts Education Partnership. Retrieved from <http://www.aep-arts.org>.

Eisner, E. W. (2002). The state of the arts and the improvement of education, *Art Education Journal*, 1(1), 2–6.

Fowler, C. (1996). *Strong arts, strong schools: The promising potential and shortsighted disregard of the arts in American schooling*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Music in World Cultures (1996). *The Georgia project: A Status report on Arts Education in the State of Georgia*. St. Boniface, MN: Author.

Richards, T. L., & Berninger, V. W. (2002). *Brain literacy for educators and psychologists*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Russell, B. (1967). *Last Essay*. <http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~russell/bressay.htm>.

Smithrim, K., & Uptis, R. (2005). Learning through the arts: Lessons of engagement. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 289(1 & 2), 109–127.

Solusa, D. (2006). How the arts develop the young brain. *School Administrator*, 63(11)26–31.

Weber, E. W., Spychiger, M., & Patry, J. (1993). *Music makes the school*. Schlussbericht zu Bessere Bildung mit mehr Musik. Pädagogisches Institut der Universität, Freiburg/C.H.