

Why Our Schools Need the Arts

reviewed by HYPERLINK "<http://www.tcrecord.org/AuthorDisplay.asp?aid=20931>" **Richard Hickman** – October 13, 2008

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Title: Why Our Schools Need the Arts

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Publisher: Teachers College Press, New York

ISBN: 080774834X, **Pages:** 150, **Year:** 2007

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Arts education has no shortage of advocates, but there continues to be a need for a clearly developed case that supports the arts as an essential part of every child's education. This book does just that. Aimed at administrators, policy makers and parents, it uses well-developed arguments, supported by research and manages to avoid the emotional hand-wringing that typifies a lot of advocacy papers. It is free of educational jargon, but in case any reader is confused by the terminology used, there is a useful glossary of arts education terms and notes which reveal the academic sources of assertions made.

In one way, this book follows on from Hetland, Winner, Veneema and Sheridan's recent publication (2007) and could be said to be from the same 'stable' - located within Harvard Project Zero. The 'unique features' cited by Jessica Davis in this book can be seen to be related to the 'studio habits of mind' put forward in Hetland et al. (2007). A major difference is its focus on the arts in general - dance, drama, music, and perhaps a greater emphasis on the learning of younger students. Davis tackles head-on the myth perpetuated by less sophisticated arts advocates that experience in the arts can boost achievement in other areas, reminding us of Elliot Eisner's question raised over a decade ago: 'Have they ever thought about asking how reading and maths courses contribute to higher performance in the arts?' (Eisner, 1998, p. 51).

Instead of making unsupported claims about how the arts can help overall achievement, the author highlights singular characteristics of the arts which are of value in themselves. She also avoids the economic argument, that the arts make a significant contribution to the economy (which they do). In short, the unique features associated with the arts are identified by Jessica Davis (p. 50) as:

- 1) Tangible product: Imagination and Agency

- 2) Focus on emotion: Expression and Empathy
- 3) Ambiguity: Interpretation and Respect
- 4) Process orientation: Inquiry and Reflection
- 5) Connection: Engagement and Responsibility

'Tangible product' can, in the arts, refer to phenomena such as paintings, poems or performances. These 'products' can be seen to be concrete manifestations of imagination; the role of imagination is central to experiencing the arts. It is through imagination, or 'envisioning' (Hetland et al., 2007) that children think beyond the mundane and see possibilities. Through *making*, young people can gain a sense of achievement and from this they can derive enhanced self-esteem.

Emotional intelligence is fostered through engagement in the arts - young people can learn how to express their feelings in a coherent way and in so doing become sensitive to the feelings of others. Some commentators have sought to enhance the status of the arts by making arts activities more cerebral, but this book tacitly asserts the notion that emotional awareness is itself of value and that this is facilitated, uniquely perhaps, in the arts.

A tolerance of ambiguity is an important aspect of creative behavior and something that is worth fostering. Engagement with the arts helps young people become more aware of multiple perspectives, that there are different ways of looking at things and many problems have more than one solution. More importantly, this opens up the way to learn respect for other people's views.

In discussing 'process orientation', Davis refers to the 'tangibility' of the arts, mentioned above, saying,

students see the impact of their thinking (process) on the art object (product), and experience as no other subject will allow, the range and importance of their own inquiry and their own ability to assess and direct that process. (p. 74)

It is this enabling of reflection that is of importance here; the arts facilitate metacognition because the arts are characterized by the importance given to the process of making and the reflective thinking that is intrinsic to that.

Why our schools need the arts is in many ways a personal manifesto, written (and illustrated) in a practical and down to earth way and is an essential read for anyone who needs to challenge decisions which could be detrimental to young people's education.

Davis shows in this book that the arts, when taught well, engage young

people in a vital and exciting way - the author uses words like 'passion and joy'. Young people can then begin to make connections to the social and cultural world beyond the school and through this be able to understand the importance of social responsibility.

While the book is replete with the passionate language of the seasoned advocate, it is well researched and does not make the unsubstantiated claims characteristic of other arts advocates. Jessica Davis states clearly and convincingly that the arts can offer a counterbalance to a narrow science-based curriculum, by making it broad and balanced. In particular, (and this is of vital importance in an age still dominated by measuring and grading) this book can be highly valued because it focuses on aspects of learning that are not easily quantifiable but are nevertheless of vital importance to individual growth and indeed to society as a whole.

References

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Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: October 13, 2008

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ID Number: 15409, Date Accessed: 6/1/2009 9:20:13 PM

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