

Book Review

Why Our High Schools Need the Arts

Jessica Hoffmann Davis

New York: Teachers College Press, 2012.

Reviewed by: Julie A. M. Smitka, Ph.D. Student
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

The arts have always had a profound impact on our lives, whether it be to express an idea, emotion, or as a way to communicate. Our worldly artistic experiences and knowledge date as far back as the prehistoric period. So why is it that music, dance, drama, and visual arts, all cultural subjects so steeped in human history are, for the most part, always on the cutting block in the educational curriculum? Why is artistic importance in the curriculum always viewed as mundane and devalued by so many policy makers?

Following her best selling book, *Why Our Schools Need the Arts*, author Jessica Hoffmann Davis brings us *Why Our High Schools Need the Arts*. In arguing for an increase in arts courses within the educational curriculum as a way to engage all students, and to alleviate the drop out rates of disenfranchised youth, Hoffmann Davis offers vivid accounts from her observations and interviews with students, teachers, and administrators in public and private American high schools, “to provide the reader . . . with the necessary information and perspective with which to argue for a prominent place for the arts in the reformation of high school curriculum” (p. 5).

Why Our High Schools Need the Arts presents an excellent argument of why the arts are so integral to students’ lives and intellectual, social, and moral development. As policy makers cut back the arts in schools, at stake are children and their future endeavors. Hoffmann Davis notes startling statistics coming from the United States: “On average, one-fourth of the students who are currently enrolled in our high schools will not graduate. When it comes to minority students (African American, Latino, or Native American), that percentage reaches nearly one-half” (p. 3). Furthermore, some schools have been labeled as “dropout factories,” where the attrition rates are more than 60% (p. 3). Moreover,

an analysis of 200 New York City schools over a 2-year period demonstrated that graduation rates were in the top third in those schools providing the most access to and the greatest resources for arts education, while those in the bottom third provided the least. The report concludes with the recommendation that an increase in students’ access to arts instruction and experience would improve school life and elevate graduation rates nationwide. (pp. 4-5)

Outlining a more detailed account of the historical foundation of the arts in curriculum, Hoffmann Davis provides many strong accounts that the arts may in fact increase the test scores of non-arts standardized tests. The arts aid in child development, meaning specifically that when the arts are omitted from the high school curriculum, students are deprived “of learning that is well aligned with their personal needs and interests, learning that equips them with modes of self-discovery and expression, [and] learning that gives them a reason to attend and to stay in school” (p. 12).

Hoffmann Davis posits five unique features of the arts and 10 specific spheres of learning that emerge and hence make the arts distinct from their non-arts counterparts. In chapter one,

the *Tangible Product*, Hoffmann Davis highlights the first two spheres of learning that result from when a student creates a dance, drama, music, or visual arts piece. She identifies the two spheres of learning as *Imagination* and *Agency*, in which imagination allows a space for the *what if?* and agency for the understanding of self-capacity. Responses from students and teachers in this chapter provide the reader with anecdotal accounts of why they think, feel, and know why the arts prove so important to student engagement in high school. One sophomore student reported that the arts allowed him to “think for [himself] as an artist . . . I never see things for what they are but for what they can be” (p. 18). A theatre teacher notes that “the primary lesson I strive for is ownership of one’s work. Taking responsibility for one’s choices and knowing one’s own potential is key to this age group” (p. 19). Of course the difference here is about how students connect with the subject. One senior student explained that “the most important thing about the art I make is that it’s mine . . . it’s up to me, my inner thoughts” (p. 23).

In chapter two, *A Focus on Emotion*, Hoffmann Davis notes the importance of the development of, and learning outcomes related to, *Expression* and *Empathy*, both of which deal with feelings on intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. Hoffmann Davis sums up chapter two with an impressive quote from a sixteen-year-old bilingual student, who specified that the arts provide

a completely different type of learning. It, you know, nourishes your soul, and it just allows you a freedom that you don’t get in the normal classroom and school a lot of times. . . . I know that people need to be able to explore themselves, express themselves, and create, and it’s not something that you’re always able to do in just the normal context of the classroom. (p. 47)

The arts allow spaces where *Expression* and *Empathy* can be taught, accessed, and tapped into, where as non-arts subjects typically don’t include these types of emotion in their curriculum documents.

Chapter three, *Ambiguity*, speaks specifically to *Interpretation* and *Respect*. Imagination allows for a liberty where meaning-making may be approached from various perspectives that allow spaces for questing and personal reflection, thereby permitting students to make connections with others over a course of several time periods. *Respect*, the second sphere of this chapter, provides an overview in which students learn that everyone has a voice and that all voices need to be respected. One of the key examples of respect brought forth in this chapter are the many complex elements of student-centered approaches to teaching and learning within the arts where “teachers of the arts repeatedly refer to their students as fellow artists—collaborators in learning,” where respect is key (p. 60).

Chapter four, *Process Orientation*, explains *Inquiry* as the ability to ask questions. Hoffmann Davis brings forth several detailed accounts of inquiry processes employed in the arts classes she observed. One example that stands out is a description from a ceramics class in a private boys school. She outlines how one tidy student “lost himself in the messy process” of ceramics, or what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls a state of *flow*; a course of action in which the arts “offer[ed] to students: deep involvement in the doing—a process orientation” or inquiry process wherein students are encouraged to think “deeply about things, realizing there is not one way to do it” (Hoffmann Davis, pp. 67, 66).

The second sphere in chapter four, *Reflection*, requires students to learn to reflect and to use reflection as a tool to self-evaluate. One 19-year-old student summarized, “I enjoy my art classes more than my other classes because instead of being lectured to, I am having a discussion with my images” (p. 72). At the conclusion of chapter four, Hoffmann Davis highlights the story of

Bruno, a student who dropped out of school when he was 17 years old. Bruno's story depicts his trials and tribulations in schooling. One of Bruno's suggestions was that

including the arts in the high school curriculum would help kids like him to stay in school . . . that students would take 'more pleasure in going to school, have more incentive if they knew it was a valid place where their passions could be nurtured.' (p. 76)

There are countless stories from students throughout the book who specify that engagement is key to staying in school and that the arts certainly play a huge role in student engagement.

In chapter five, *Connection*, students learn about the process of *Engagement* specifically with their own work, with others, and within the communities created in an arts classroom. Arts students discuss the passions of their arts teachers in and outside the traditional high school arts curriculum, specifying that many of their arts teachers are practicing artists outside of their teaching profession. One student who labeled his inability to sit still and to control his excess energy as *Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*, reported that "the intense engagement he felt in his dance classes [allowed him to] maintain focus longer than in academic classes," which in turn, "helped him do better in his academic classes" because it provided him with a "safe haven" (p. 84). And finally, in chapter five, the second sphere is *Responsibility*. Hoffmann Davis discusses it as a way to make a difference within a community. A brilliant example of this is previewed to us through a school performance of *Peter Pan*.

In her final chapter, *With an Eye to the Future*, Hoffmann Davis suggests multiple and realistic suggestions for fortifying the arts within the educational curriculum. Some of the suggestions include increasing the amount of arts credits required for graduation, increasing resources within the arts, bringing in more visiting artists, and providing more opportunities for field trips to arts based centers.

Hoffmann Davis' passion for the arts and student learning is woven in each and every thread of the stories she has chosen to include in *Why Our High Schools Need the Arts*. Her book comes at an integral time in educational reform when arts curricula are on the chopping block now more than ever. In the context of standardized tests that can demean the value of learning for students (p. 98), the arts provide rich forums for the imagination, agency, expression, empathy, interpretation, respect, inquiry, reflection, engagement, and responsibility, all of which are key skills to the overall development of students. The arts are the most cross-curricular and interdisciplinary subjects because they allow students to extend and apply the spheres of learning to non-arts subjects. The arts provide real world experiences where students are "forced to take chances, make decisions, and deal with ambiguity" (p. 58). They are the "most important thing if not because they are so wonderful and rich but because they impact everything" (p. 93).

Why Our High Schools Need the Arts reflects an American perspective but it is directly relevant to similar government policy across Canada. It is well written and the views are supported by qualitative and quantitative data. The author has shown that the arts play a crucial role in high schools not only by enriching students' knowledge, but also by promoting students' participation in high school and beyond. The arts not only promote schools' goals to educate but, according to Hoffmann Davis, they may also assist with the challenge of preventing high school dropouts. Arguing strictly for how the arts benefit and enhance student learning and achievement is certainly the highlight of the book. Supported by statistical data and reference to many arts and educational philosophers such as Nelson Goodman, Maxine Greene, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and others, *Why Our High Schools Need the Arts* is one book well worth reading for anyone interested in how the arts play a role in the educational curriculum of our

students.

References

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
Hoffmann Davis, J. (2008). *Why our schools need the arts*. New York: Teachers College Press.
Hoffmann Davis, J. (2012). *Why our high schools need the arts*. New York: Teachers College Press.
-

Julie A. M. Smitka is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, and is a Junior Fellow at Massey College. Julie formerly taught visual arts in England and has been teaching in the Peel District School Board in Ontario since 2005. Her research interests include the arts in schools, embodiment studies, student-teacher relationships, and phenomenology.