



Rena Uptis

What is Arts Education Good For?

In 1999, Katharine Smithrim and I were invited to evaluate the effects of an elementary education model called *Learning Through the Arts* that was operating in six Canadian sites – Vancouver, Calgary, Regina, Windsor, Cape Breton, and Western Newfoundland. We were eager to undertake this evaluation, for we realized that this task would provide us with an important opportunity to document the effects of the arts on students, teachers, parents, artists, and administrators. While there are numerous American and European large-scale studies that claim that the arts are important to learning and to general well-being, this work was the first study of its type and scope to be conducted in Canada.

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CONTEXT

Scholars and philosophers all over the world have argued that the arts are part of what make us human. Ellen Dissanayake shows how the arts have served a similar function to language in the development of the human species.¹ She points to the importance of repetition, rule, and ritual associated with artistic activities as features that assist in the ordering and shaping of physical and social worlds. She argues that the arts evolved in order to make socially significant experiences memorable and pleasurable and to make otherwise unbearable experiences bearable, concluding that the arts are a natural and necessary part of the human condition. Elliott Eisner also argues eloquently about the role of the arts in teaching students to savour ambiguity, to tolerate difference, and to learn that nuance matters. The arts are also about experiencing the joy of creation and learning ways of expressing thoughts, knowledge, and feelings beyond words alone.² They teach us how to make judgments in the absence of rules, that human purposes and goals are best held with flexibility, and that some

activities are self-justifying.³ These are the primary reasons that the arts have a place in schools and in our lives.

There are other benefits associated with the arts as well. I call these “bonus benefits” because I think of them as “extras”—extras to the intrinsic values that are at the core of what the arts are ‘good for’. The most obvious bonus benefits are those associated with intellectual achievement in other subjects. Researchers claim that intellectual benefits include the development of general thinking skills and problem solving abilities and the development of different ways of making meaning,⁴ both of which contribute to self-confidence, and even to developing a more complex neural network in the brain.⁵ Researchers also claim that there are links between studies in the arts and achievement in mathematics and language.⁶ In the State of Georgia, with roughly 600,000 students in 841 schools, in those schools where arts were made a priority, students had higher SAT scores, were less likely to drop out of high school, and were more likely to complete college.⁷ Charles Fowler has also demonstrated that students who had four or more years of fine arts courses also scored higher on the verbal and math measures of the SAT.⁸

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However, in thinking about the research that links arts education with academic achievement in other areas, it is important to remember that the arts as handmaidens won't do – any more than it would do for a mathematics educator to suggest that more time should be devoted to mathematics because it will increase music scores. The arts are important because all subjects are important. And because they are part of what make us human.

LEARNING THROUGH THE ARTS

The *Learning Through the Arts* (LTTA) program was developed by The Royal Conservatory of Music in an effort to infuse the teaching of the so-called ‘core’ school subjects – language, mathematics, science – with the arts. The program involves artists working with teachers and students, and developing together units of study that meet the provincial curriculum guidelines while, at the same time, incorporating the arts. For example, a dancer might work with a teacher to develop a unit on geometry as interpreted through the discipline of modern dance.

Our research involved almost 7,000 students in Grades 1 through 6. Some of these students were from LTTA schools, and some were from two other types of schools – ‘regular’ schools where there were no special programs in place, and

elementary schools that had some other school-wide initiative, such as a focus on technology. At the end of three years, for most measures of mathematics and language achievement, there were no significant differences between the Grade 6 students in the LTTA schools and students in the two other kinds of schools. That is, involvement in the arts for the students in the LTTA schools did not come at the expense of achievement in mathematics and language. However, on mathematical tests designed specifically to measure computation and estimation, the Grade 6 LTTA students scored significantly higher than students in the two types of control schools, equivalent to a difference of 11 percentile points. That is, if a child was scoring at the 50th percentile at the beginning of the three-year study, that same child might be in the 61st percentile at the end of the study. Because there were no baseline differences in mathematics achievement or in socioeconomic status for students in the various types of schools, it would appear that gains in computation and estimation scores were a result of taking part in the LTTA program. Further, there was no interaction effect between socioeconomic factors and program type. Thus, insofar as there was a program effect in mathematics, the benefits of the LTTA program occurred for children of all socioeconomic classes.

From our survey data and interviews with teachers, students, administrators, artists and parents, it is clear that the participants believed that involvement in the arts contributed to engagement in learning. All talked about how the arts

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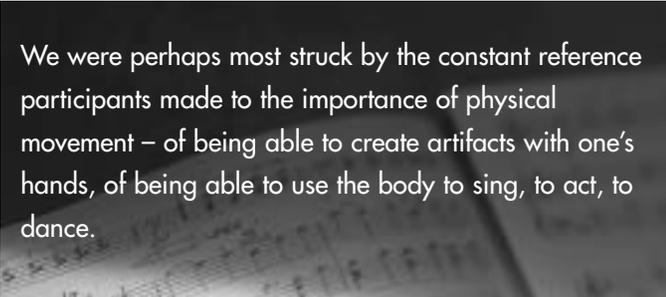
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EN BREF

Le Programme *Learning Through the Arts* (LTTA) a été conçu par le Conservatoire royal de la musique afin d'incorporer un peu d'arts dans les matières de base du programme d'études – langues, mathématiques et sciences. Après un essai qui a duré trois ans, on a pu mesurer certains des bénéfices du programme, tels que l'amélioration des résultats en calcul. Dans d'autres domaines cependant, les gains étaient moins tangibles. Néanmoins, le plus important, c'était de savoir dans quelle mesure les arts allaient transformer la vie des enseignants et des élèves à long terme. Comme le note un élève : « La musique réjouit l'esprit. Quand on apprend quelque chose de nouveau, on éprouve du plaisir et cela nous aide à apprécier d'autres matières telles que les mathématiques. »

motivated children, referring to the emotional, physical, cognitive, and social benefits of learning in and through the arts. Of these various benefits, we were perhaps most struck by the constant reference participants made to the importance of physical movement – of being able to create artifacts with one's hands, of being able to use the body to sing, to act, to dance.

Activities outside of school also had an impact on student achievement in math and language. Music lessons outside of school and reading for pleasure were significant contributing factors for achievement in math and language after the effects of socioeconomic status and the LTTA program effects were considered. The data also indicated that some kinds of student activities were more likely to group together than others. For example, children who read for pleasure and take music lessons were also likely to belong to clubs and engage in organised sports and were unlikely to spend their leisure time playing videogames. These same children were also likely to perform well at school.



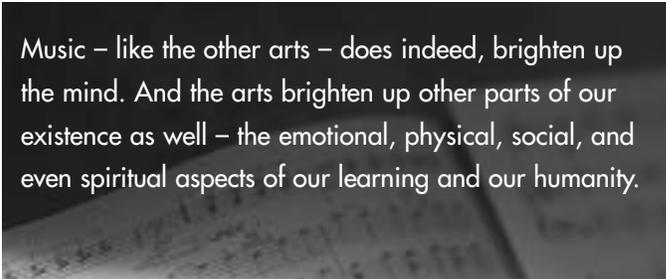
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Nearly all parents reported that the arts motivated their children to learn. Less than one percent of parents questioned the importance of arts programs. Artists also observed a wide variety of benefits to students engaged in the arts, including the development of arts skills, exploration of curriculum topics through the arts, and laying the foundation for a lifelong love of the arts.

By the end of the three-year period, significantly more LTTA teachers than teachers in other types of schools believed that the arts were an effective way to teach language, science,

and math. LTTA teachers reported a number of changes in classroom practices that reflected their increased commitment to teaching through the arts and their growing skills and confidence in embedding the arts in their teaching practices. Over 90% of the LTTA teachers reported that they had come to a fuller appreciation of how students could learn about the non-arts subjects through arts-infused instruction, and that the arts could be used effectively to teach concepts in math, science and language. Close to two-thirds of the LTTA teachers gave specific examples of how they were now more confident in using arts-based approaches in their teaching. One teacher expressed this new-found courage in saying, “Now I grasp the teachable moment when the kids suggest things, for example, taking a story and making it into a play.”

In a similar vein, principals of LTTA schools were more



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likely than principals in the control schools to personally consider the arts as ‘very important’, although they did identify a number of barriers to further implementation of the arts in their schools. For example, some principals identified the lack of availability of skilled teachers as a problem, while others indicated that they couldn't afford to have more time ‘taken away’ from other curriculum areas (despite the finding that more time in the arts did not cause test scores to suffer). Interestingly, while a number of LTTA principals identified lack of funding as an issue at the beginning of the study, by the end of the study, this was seen as less of a barrier, partly because the principals had a better understanding of how arts programs could be implemented and partly because their own priorities had, in many cases, shifted towards favouring a more arts-rich curriculum. Site coordinators kept close tabs on the LTTA program in their cities and regions and reported far-reaching benefits to schools, teachers, students, and artists. These site coordinators were instrumental in keeping the channels of communication open between all parties. School district superintendents viewed the arts as critical in education and the LTTA program as a partial solution to chronic under-funding and lack of expertise in elementary arts education.

WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE?

From the results of our study, it is evident that the students in the LTTA program benefited in many ways. Some benefits lent themselves to measurement, such as gains in computation scores. Others were more ephemeral, but perhaps even more important in the long term, as students' and teachers' lives

were transformed through the arts. The students, themselves, often had the most eloquent ways of expressing how the arts contributed to their experiences at school. I will close with the thoughts of one Grade 6 boy, who said: *Music brightens up the mind. When you learn something new, you feel good and that makes you feel good in other subjects like math.*

Music – like the other arts – does indeed, brighten up the mind. And the arts brighten up other parts of our existence as well – the emotional, physical, social, and even spiritual aspects of our learning and our humanity. Both the students and adults involved in the research recognized that the arts have this power, and that arts education deserves a central place in schooling. 🌍

- 1 Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992).
- 2 E.W. Eisner, "The State of the Arts and the Improvement of Education," *Art Education Journal* 1 no. 1 (2002): 2-6; M. Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995)
- 3 Eisner.
- 4 C. Fowler, *Strong Arts, Strong Schools: The Promising Potential and Shortsighted Disregard of the Arts in American Schooling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); N. Welch and A. Greene, *Schools, Communities and the Arts: A Research Compendium* (Tempe, AZ: Morrison Institute for Public Policy, Arizona State University, 1995).
- 5 J. T. Bruer, *The Myth of the First Three Years: A New Understanding of Early Brain Development and Life Long Learning* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

- 6 e.g., J. Catterall, "Does Experience in the Arts Boost Academic Achievement?" *Art Education* 51, no. 3 (1998): 6-11; J. Catterall, R. Chapleau, and J. Iwanaga, *Involvement in the Arts and Human Development: General Involvement and Intensive Involvement in Music and Theater Arts* (The Imagination Project at UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California at Los Angeles, 1999): <<http://www.aep-arts.org/highlights/coc-release.html>>; R. J. Deasy, *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (Washington, DC: Arts Education Partnership, 2002): also available on line at <http://www.aep-arts.org>.
- 7 *Music in World Cultures: A Status Report on Arts Education in the State of Georgia* (St. Bonafice, MN, The Georgia Project, 1996).
- 8 C. Fowler, *Strong Arts, Strong Schools: The Promising Potential and Shortsighted Disregard of the Arts in American Schooling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- 9 E. Winner and M. Cooper, "Mute Those Claims: No Evidence (Yet) for a Causal Link Between Arts Study and Academic Achievement," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 34, nos. 3-4 (2000): 11-75.

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The research reported here was supported by the George C. Metcalf Foundation, the CP Charitable Foundation, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Standard Grant # 410-000-052).

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