Integrating the Arts

By: Rebecca Riddle

There is quite a debate regarding the importance of the arts in the classroom. While some teachers believe classrooms should focus solely on core subjects like mathematics, language arts, science and social studies, others focus on brain-based education and understand that cognitive skills, as well as the arts, play a critical role in the classroom. These teachers recognize the many advantages of art integration in the classroom, which will be discussed in this paper.

I believe in children. I believe that each individual child has the potential for greatness. I understand that each child has a unique learning style, and as their teacher, I will provide a variety of activities throughout the year to ensure that each student reaches his or her full potential.

Part of helping students reach their full potential involves helping them develop their cognitive skills. In the past, teachers thought about math, reading and writing as the primary basics that need to be taught to the students. Now, however, educators are starting to focus on cognitive skills as underlying mental processes, which are essential in order to teach other skills like math, reading and writing.

It has come to light that intelligence is not fixed. According to Betsy Hill, President and COO, and Roger Stark, Founder and CEO of Learning Enhancement Corporation, “Neuroscience shows us how to impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the learning process by improving each individual’s underlying mental functioning—that is, by improving internal factors and changing the experience of learning from the inside out.” This is a huge idea, especially in the field of education.

Cognitive skills determine how we think, process, learn and remember. It is imperative that teachers strengthen theses cognitive skills in order to help students communicate, solve problems and think critically. These important skills are determined by how our brain works and not by how much information we’ve collected.

Cognitive skills generally have not been taught in the classroom because it is time-consuming, expensive and often requires specialized training. Thanks to today’s technology, however, schools can overcome these obstacles. This will mean dramatic changes for students, teachers and administrators, but I think it will be in a positive way. Understanding and strengthening students’ cognitive skills will help teachers prepare their students for success. According to the instruction of Karen Borbolla and Michael Gielniak, our main goal as teachers is to, “set our students up for success.”

Art integration in the classroom is another way to set our students up for success. To me, there is no one set definition of art. It has a variety of meanings. Art is a way of creatively expressing yourself. Art can be broken down into four categories including art, drama, music and dance/movement. There are many different mediums of art, from drawing, painting and sculpting, to singing or playing an instrument. It can also range from dancing to physically express yourself or writing a song to mentally express yourself.

Even before this class, I understood that art could do many things. I realized that it could be used to express emotions, such as a joyful painting or a sad song. It could therapeutic, like sculpting clay or dancing. It could be motivating and inspirational, like playing a high-energy song before an athletic event or becoming inspired by a patriotic sculpture. It could be soothing, too, like playing soft, slow music before going to bed. Art could also be used to communicate thoughts and ideas, such as performing a play, writing a poem or drawing a picture.

After this class, however, I understand much more about art and what it can do. I have learned that we are a very visual culture. We are constantly manipulated by art in the form of imagery, sound, smell and even music, which tap into our emotions. We must teach our students how to decode these experiences by breaking them down. These manipulations are so strong because they play on our emotions. I’ve learned that emotions are a necessity for learning. Positive emotions strengthen learning experiences. According to author and consultant Pat Wolfe of Mind Matters Inc, “Emotions are a primary catalyst in the learning process. Emotions stamp the brain with extra vividness. If educators can provide appropriate motivational emotion, students will remember new information longer.” Knowing this, we can use the arts in the classroom to provide positive emotions in different content areas to help students retain the information they’ve learned. Another way to help students retain information is by standing in different areas of the room while teaching different subjects. Then, students will associate that area with the content being taught.

Why would we want to incorporate art into the curriculum, anyway? Art is an extremely important part of the curriculum in educating a student for many reasons. First, it strengthens the students’ cognitive and creative skills. Like I mentioned earlier, these skills are essential to be successful in today’s world. Students need those underlying cognitive skills before they can effectively learn other material. It is important to strengthen creative skills so that students can be critical thinkers and problem solvers.

This is another reason art is significant in the classroom — it helps students become better problem solvers. Art can have many different interpretations. When solving a problem with art, there is more than one right answer, and students will dig a little deeper to find the solution. This provides students with an opportunity to make associations and reach a higher level of thinking. In *Ten Lessons the Arts Teach*, Elliot Eisner explains, “The arts teach children that problems can have much more than one solution and that questions can have more than one answer.” When we presented our self-portraits, I learned a very valuable lesson. Because there is more than one right answer, it is critical to give the students the freedom of choice. Let them choose how to creatively express themselves and watch what happens! Students are more likely to think outside of the box and succeed. Using our class as an example, each student came up with a unique solution to the problem. This notion applies to the classroom, as well as the real world.

Next, it teaches students to be open-minded. By showing different forms of art from different cultures, students learn to be more accepting of others and others’ ideas. This concept can stretch across any content area, all the way into real-world situations.

Art in the classroom can also build self-confidence within the students. When students are struggling in areas such as math or reading, their confidence can be shattered and their true potential never reached. By providing these students an opportunity to perform well at a task that is not being graded, such as drawing a picture, their confidence levels increase. This confidence often transfers to other content areas, and students are more likely to reach their higher potential.

Art is also a fantastic medium to allow students to work cooperatively. Like we did in class with the scavenger hunt throughout the building, the symmetry project in the hall and the musical interpretations of storybooks, we worked together to come up with a solution. This not only created a sense of unity, but it gave us the skills to work together with others in the real world. As Karen Borbolla and Michael Gielniak often say, “The mind brain is social.”

Finally, incorporating art, music, drama and movement into the classroom can help keep the students engaged and interested in the material. We can benefit from this by using songs to teach math concepts, using sculptures to present science material, using dramatic plays to study literature or even using drawings to emphasize social studies concepts.

In his keynote speech on why the arts matter, Jerome Kagan, Ph.D., provides six reasons for advocating the importance of arts in the schools. These reasons include boosting self confidence, helping children develop a personal agency, amplifying the child’s understanding of self and the world, providing youth with values they feel warrant consistent loyalty, allowing children to work as cooperative units and providing children with opportunities to experience and express feelings that are not fully conscious and cannot be expressed in words.

When discussing self-confidence in the classroom, Kagan notes that children are, “vulnerable to becoming discouraged when they sense that a goal they desire is probably unattainable.” Because of this, many students make up their mind about their ability to do an assignment before they even try. Kagan further explains that, “One strategy to mute a child’s discouraging self competence is to provide the child with opportunities to be successful at some classroom task. Art, dance, film and music are perfect candidates.” Each student’s artwork is acceptable because it is their attempt to create beauty. Again, there is more than one right answer.

It was very interesting when Kagan discussed his final, and in my opinion the most important, reason for advocating the importance of arts in the schools. Art — in all its forms — provides students with an outlet to express emotions and feelings that they cannot express with words. He gave several examples of this concept when he said, “A child who is afraid of the class bully, angry at a harsh father, or jealous of an attractive older sister, but cannot put these feelings into words might be able to express these feelings in art.” This not only helps the student on an academic level by keeping them focused instead of distracted by these feelings, but also on a personal level by helping them express and cope with these feelings.

Elliot Eisner’s words compliment this notion. He said, “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.”

In conclusion, although there is an ongoing debate about the importance of integrating the arts into the classroom, I have discovered its true value through what I already knew, what I’ve learned in this class and plenty of research that provided examples of the significant role art play in students’ lives. Integrating art in the classroom strengthens students’ cognitive and creative skills, helps them become better problem solvers, teaches them to be open-minded, builds self-confidence, allows students to work cooperatively and keeps students engaged and interested in the material. To be the best teachers we can be and help our students reach their fullest potential, it is vital to incorporate the arts into the classroom.

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