

Why Kids Need Art



Eldon Katter

What do we want kids to be good at? What do we want them to know and be able to do? Would it be wrong to assume that most of us want all children to learn the skills they'll need to manage on their own to lead productive and rewarding lives? Surely we would also want kids to become lifelong learners who are astute and critical

observers, careful and creative thinkers, informed consumers, and productive workers with adaptable skills.

As an artist and former teacher, I have always believed that art education can contribute to the development of these broadly applicable skills. So I struggle with trying to

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understand why school districts do not always support art programs, and why some don't even include the teaching of art by certified art specialists as a part of basic education.

Lack of time and lack of money are reasons most often given for slighting school art programs. Lack of support may also be an issue because policy makers often don't understand what it means to study

art.

As advocates for art education, we can develop simple explanations of instructional goals and ensure that teaching practices are in keeping with those goals. Meaningful art education encompasses four broad goals: perception, production, critical reflection,

and valuing traditions. Let's look at how each of these goals contributes to the development of lifelong skills and productive work habits.

Perception

More than anything else, art education is about helping students process visual and tactile information so that they can find meaning in, and make informed decisions about, their environment as well as works of art. Through guided practice in perception and reflection on essential questions about what they are seeing or sensing, students begin to construct a perception skill base that prepares them to be astute, curious, comparative, and critical observers of their surroundings, both natural and human-made.

Production

Most children will probably not pursue art-making into their adult lives. However, they will use the skills they develop through the creation of art. Productive work habits such as setting goals, imagining possibilities, generating and refining ideas, considering alternatives and making choices, testing and going beyond predictable outcomes, applying standards, and reflecting critically on performance are appreciated in every modern workplace and beyond the world of work.

Critical Reflection

While not everyone will become an artist, it's important to remember that every child will become an active, lifelong perceiver of images and objects in a variety of forms. Through art education, children learn to identify sensory and emotional qualities, interpret symbolic meaning, judge quality, and explain the significance of artistic accomplishments. These skills are vital in a consumer-oriented world increasingly influenced by designed objects. The


Continued on page XX.

habit of establishing facts, questioning opinions, and weighing judgments related to visual forms leads to responsible decision-makers and informed consumers.

Valuing Traditions

Art has been called our first language. Through inquiry into the origins and traditions of artistic practices, children learn about human commonalities throughout time and around the world. At the same time, they gain an awareness of diverse belief systems and multiple ways of seeing and responding to the world. An appreciation of the artistic accomplishments of diverse cultures contributes to our becoming more sensitive, tolerant, and caring adults.

Every community can benefit from an investment in an education that prepares its citizens to better understand and appreciate the richness of artistic expression. By making art education an integral part of every school curriculum and certified art specialists an integral part of the teaching staff, we can look forward to a future of productive and caring adults, workers with adaptable skills, informed consumers, critical observers, careful and creative thinkers, and responsible decision-makers.

Remember, art is an essential part of what makes us human. 

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