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Benefits of Visual Arts on Elementary School Students

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Senior Capstone Spring 2020

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Abstract

One will most readily agree that visual arts have been set aside from the everyday instructional curriculum that teachers use at the elementary school level. Contrarily, numerous evidences suggest that visual arts have an important role in elementary schools and can significantly benefit students' academic performance. This senior capstone research project examines the benefits of visual arts on elementary school students through the use of literature review from scholarly sources, anonymous online teacher surveys, and in-person teacher interviews. The results indeed indicate that visual arts are an important and necessary part of elementary education and that it is especially important for educators to collaborate with each other, as well as with local, state, and federal institutions, to collectively strategize upon the methods for integrating and maintaining it in schools across the country.

Introduction and Background

The benefits of visual arts have long been on the table for discussion. Throughout history and even today, visual arts represent many individuals and different cultures. It helps to give voice and meaning to each of them in a unique way, and it defines one's place in the world. As societies continued developing into more complex systems overtime, visual arts were something often only afforded to and appreciated by the wealthy upper class. A well-known philosopher of the early twentieth century and a highly influential individual in the educational field at the time, John Dewey, maintained that art is a human experience and something that should be afforded to everyone (Dewey, 1934). He advocated that art is an individual process, meaning there is no definition that specifically constitutes what it is or is not (Dewey, 1934). Furthermore, he theorized that children need education that is authentic and allows them to grow mentally, physically, and socially by providing opportunities to be creative, critical thinkers. Dewey (1934) believed that arts are indeed experience, and that access to arts education opens processes of inquiry that expand a child's perception of the world and create venues for understanding and action (Goldblatt, 2006; as cited by Heilig et al., 2010). It was through Dewey's philosophies that educators became inspired to link visual arts with education.

There are numerous benefits that elementary school students get when given the opportunity to participate in visual art activities. Since the time of John Dewey, more studies on this matter have been developed. In addition to his theories, some additional benefits include a positive impact on academic performance, a chance for self-expression, which can contribute to individuality, and positive effects on the brain, which influences health. Despite these benefits however, educational reform is a continuous endeavor. History has been riddled with debate over the best approaches for carrying out education in the United States. This is perhaps the biggest

hurdle that prevents visual arts from maintaining a significant status in the education system. Educational reform typically comes down to deciding what's important and what isn't. This issue typically falls into patterns that repeat over time. Patterns that prioritize other subject matters as being more important, given the circumstances. This usually comes in the form of policy changes that put visual arts in the background. Consequently, the benefits get overlooked.

To many educators today, the most familiar examples of policy changes include the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and the more recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Despite both policies placing less focus on visual arts education, it is still possible for it to be included. Educators are constantly looking at ways for visual art to tie into other subject matters, and there are studies that show this to be successful in learning comprehension especially for students who learn visually or have trouble excelling in regular academic instruction (Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM, 2019). Given that these benefits can support elementary school students, there is a heightened importance for educators to advocate for visual arts to be a regular part of elementary school classrooms. Not only does this involve the need for educators to collaborate with each other in order to plan for the best arts integration strategies, but it also involves the need to elevate visual arts to a greater level in order for it to be maintained in schools.

With all this information in mind, I was able to frame my primary research question which is as follows: *What are the benefits of visual arts on elementary school students?* To answer this question, the following secondary research questions will be addressed: *What does research say about the benefits of visual arts on elementary school students? Following the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), how do they impact the instruction of visual arts in elementary school classrooms?*

If visual arts are beneficial to elementary school students, how does a lack of such affect them? If visual arts are important, could teachers integrate them into their daily instruction of other subjects? If so, how? Finally, what could teachers do to ensure visual arts remain in the curriculum to benefit students' learning?

Literature Review

Mounting evidence suggests that visual arts are both an important and highly beneficial part of elementary education. Studies show that the process of regularly allowing elementary school students to engage in visual arts activities will positively influence their academic achievement and development. Some of those benefits include developing creative and flexible forms of thinking, observing, envisioning, innovating, and reflecting, all through the general exposure to an aesthetic experience (National Art Education Association, 2016). Research also maintains that aesthetic experiences are a part of every human being and are fundamental aspects of health, well-being, and learning (Magsamen, 2019). Not only are visual arts beneficial to the individual, but also to a communal setting. It is a concept that is represented differently by value and meaning among many different cultures around the world, a concept that has been prevalent throughout history, and a concept that has brought people together.

Yet, as far as the education system in the United States is concerned, despite the numerous benefits and the long history of visual arts, the twenty first century has been riddled with debate over the true educational value of visual arts. Educational policy changes such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), concerned many educators that there would be a narrowing of curriculum throughout the educational system in the United States (Myers, 2010). With this legislation essentially prioritizing language arts and mathematics as being more essential, educators have had to devote more time and resources to those subject matters, which subsequently

deemed visual art as a subject of lesser importance. As a result, and still to this day, elementary school students do not get much exposure to the elements of visual art and therefore cannot benefit from what they have to offer. This brings me to state that the purpose of this research project is to elevate visual arts to a status of importance and to push it to be regularly practiced in elementary school classrooms. Within this literature review, I will begin by discussing the definition of visual arts and what it entails. Next, I will cover the history of visual arts in relation to education, which will begin with an overview of John Dewey's philosophies and how they inspired educators to begin linking visual art and education, followed by its continued development over the remainder of the twentieth century, and concluding with the development of educational reform-based circumstances that influenced future policy changes such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). I will continue by providing an overview of NCLB as well as the most recent legislation, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and how those have impacted the ability for elementary educators to carry out visual arts-related activities with their students.

What is Visual Art?

Beginning with definition, visual arts is an umbrella term for a broad category of art which include a number of artistic disciplines such as ceramics, drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, design, crafts, photography, video, film making and architecture, to name a few (Unbound Visual Arts, 2012). It involves an object or experience consciously created through an expression of skill or imagination. "Many of these pieces of art are created to stimulate us through a visual experience. When we look at them, they often provoke a feeling of some sort" (Esaak, 2019). Additionally, having the opportunity to engage in this type of art form gives one the ability to express feeling, emotion, opinion, or taste (Miller, 2017).

A Historical Lens: The Relationship Between Visual Art and Education

Regarding a historical perspective, one of the earliest notable figures to advocate the importance of visual arts was a man named John Dewey. He is still to this day, considered to be one of the most influential philosophers and educational reformers of the early twentieth century. In one of his arguments, he stated that there is no formal kind of art that is inherently superior to another and upon “examining the specifics of art’s place in the world, he wondered: If artists are a kind of interpreter, are they interpreting the world to themselves? Or interpreting something to something else? What are they doing, besides participating in the physical process of making art with physical materials found in space-time” (Hammond, 2017)? Additionally, in his book titled “-Art as Experience-” (1934), Dewey (1934) strengthens his case by maintaining that visual arts needs to be a human experience. In one example, he argued that art must be saved from simply being a luxury experience to be viewed only in museums. Dewey (1934) states “The growth of capitalism has been a powerful influence in the development of the museum as the proper home for works of art, and in the promotion of the idea that they are apart from the common life” (p.8). Consequently, Dewey’s philosophies became the sparks that lit the fuse for a change of ideals in the future. Educators at the time had then been inspired and influenced to make a connection between visual arts and schools. As a result, the beginning of the twentieth century was the first time that there was a substantial push to include visual arts as a part of the educational curriculum in schools across the United States. From there, the case would only grow.

(Heilig et al., 2010) maintains that during the turn of that century:

As the economy grew, a new middle class emerged that sought access to aesthetic elements of culture. The arts were no longer seen as simply the purview of the wealthy upper class. These changes in the social structure brought with them a different attitude toward teaching the arts (p.137).

Efland (1983; as cited in Heilig et al., 2010) states that by the end of the 1920s, educators were confident that visual arts had a strong position in the educational curriculum. Despite large numbers of school districts funding arts education, the Great Depression and the war years changed that. During these periods, many schools were closed, and teacher pay was cut; however, student enrollment continued growing. Subsequently, with shortened funds and supplies, visual art was not considered to be a priority for students (Tyack 1976, Efland 1983 & Saunders, 1971; as cited in Heilig et al., 2010). The 1950s saw an expansion of visual arts education. School boards began to increase funding for visual art programs and more teachers who specialized in art were being employed. Despite this, it was also during this time that art education suffered another setback (Heilig et al., 2010). With the Soviet Union launching Sputnik into space, the top priorities of education shifted to science and mathematics, which placed visual arts in the background once more (Saunders 1971 and Smith 1996; as cited by Heilig et al., 2010). In 1965, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was established and “Became for many, the symbolic location for the arts and arts education policymaking in America (Bauerlein 2008 & Chapman, 2000; as cited by Heilig et al., 2010). During this decade, the federal government was much more involved with visual arts and education; however, Heilig et al., (2010) maintains that “The election of Reagan was viewed as a turning point for the role of government in many arenas.” One circumstance was the appointment of Frank Hodsoll as head of the NEA. With this position, the following is maintained:

Hodsoll questioned the NEA’s sole focus on experiences provided by visiting artists and argued, along with many certified arts teachers, for sequential curricula, comprehensive testing, improved data gathering, improved teacher quality, the recruitment of outstanding teachers, and increased educational responsibility (Heilig et al., 2010, p.138).

Heilig et al., (2010) at this point, makes a summative statement, saying “It is no accident that these solutions are eerily similar to the theory of action underlying the current NCLB (No Child Left

Behind) policy environment,” and that “these concepts evolved into the specific policies of NCLB that hurt the very arts programs Hodsoll was trying to assist” (p.138).

An Overview of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Moving into the twenty-first century, educational reform was a priority in the United States, and as it would seem, there were many debates over which approaches would work best for providing students with a quality education. The No Child Left Behind act (hereafter NCLB), was a federal legislation that was approved by congress in December 2001 and signed into law by President George W. Bush in January 2002. Essentially, the NCLB act scaled up the federal government's role in holding schools accountable for student outcomes. It “used scores on standardized tests in language arts and mathematics to evaluate school performance, thereby focusing instructional time on student achievement in these two content areas” (Chapman 2004, Ruppert, 2006; as cited by Gara et al., 2018). In exchange for federal funding, NCLB also required schools to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) on test scores so that a higher majority of students perform at a proficient or advanced level (Gara et al., 2018). Additionally, there were AYP benchmarks throughout each school year. The purpose of these benchmarks was to measure the quality of instruction from teachers by examining whether students were making progress in their academics. If schools were not found to be progressing well, they were generally put on a probationary status where they were given an ultimatum to get their students to perform up to standard or lose their federal funding all together. In terms of visual arts, because of this NCLB legislation, teachers had to view language arts and mathematics as being the most important. Consequently, visual arts and other subjects like history, science, etc. have been reduced.

An Overview of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Despite the effects from NCLB, it's also important to look ahead and consider some of the more recent legislation and how it plays an influential role on visual arts in the classroom. NCLB did have a successor known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (hereafter ESSA). ESSA was signed into law by President Barack Obama in December 2015, and it was meant to replace NCLB with an updated and more suitable form of accountability for schools. Essentially, this act scaled back the federal government's role in holding schools accountable for academic performance, and it allowed states more flexibility in deciding which educational plans they will utilize. This also includes addressing the achievement of disadvantaged students, such as students in poverty, minority groups, special education, and students who primarily speak a different language that is not English. This freedom, however, must fall within a framework set by the federal government. The plan must include a description of the following: academic standards, annual testing, school accountability, goals for academic achievement, plans for supporting and improving struggling schools, and state and local report cards (Lee, 2016).

Starting with academic standards, each state is required to generate their own academically challenging standards for each grade level. In other words, each state must provide a curriculum that prepares students for college and beyond. One thing that has not changed from NCLB is the requirement of state testing. "States must test students in reading and math once a year, in grades 3 through 8, as well as once in high school. They must also test kids in science once in grade school, middle school, and high school" (Lee, 2016, para. 4). Accountability measures were also more flexible. As opposed to NCLB, which solely used test scores in language arts and mathematics to determine accountability, states have to give more weight to other academic factors that might determine performance, such as: academic achievement, academic progress, English

language proficiency, high school graduation rates, and an additional state chosen method of measuring either school quality or student performance. Examples of this might include: kindergarten readiness, access to and completion of advanced coursework, college readiness, discipline rates, and chronic absenteeism. States need to also come up with their own achievement goals in order to measure whether students are improving or not. According to Lee (2016), “These goals are supposed to help struggling students catch up and close the achievement gap with other students. Again, these goals must be spelled out in each state plan” (para. 6). These goals must also lead to plans for improvement, especially for schools that are struggling with performance. ESSA defines two categories of performance struggling: “‘Comprehensive Support and Improvement’ schools, which are the lowest performing schools in a state, and ‘Targeted Support and Improvement’ schools, where certain student groups are consistently underperforming” (Lee, 2016, para. 7). Lastly, ESSA requires each state and school to have a local report card in which the public can see how well they are performing.

Ideally, the goal of ESSA is to create a well-rounded education system in schools across the United States. “Although the law does not dictate what subjects constitute a well-rounded education, it clarifies that a well-rounded education can include ‘the arts’ and ‘music’ along with other academic subject areas, such as history and foreign languages.” (Wan, et al., 2018). ESSA also provides funding for several optional programs to assist schools (Lee, 2016). Because ESSA gives states more flexibility, it encourages schools to be innovative and to teach students in different ways, particularly through its encouragement for states and schools to increase personalized learning (Lee, 2016). Personalized learning, as explained by Lee (2016), “aims to meet students where they are. It allows kids to learn at their own pace and to have a say in how and what they learn.” Ultimately, giving states and schools the flexibility to seek out a well-

rounded education for their students opens many more possibilities that not only strengthen academic achievement but also increases the likelihood of bringing visual arts back into the centerfold of educational curriculum.

At this point, the research here is showing that there is an overall lack of visual arts in elementary schools. This information also suggests that there has been a continual pattern throughout history of visual arts being thrown into the background at the expense of other events or curricular subjects being prioritized more. Moving forward, it becomes important to understand and use the above information as a means of developing useful strategies that will most effectively bring visual arts back into the centerfold of educational curriculum.

Methods and Procedures

In order to answer my primary and secondary research questions, several methods and procedures were put in place over a two-month period. This study focuses on elementary school students and the ways in which visual arts can have a positive effect on their academics. It is important to consider that these effects likely have a high potential to carry on with many students as they progress toward middle school, high school, and adulthood. This only stresses the importance for heightened exposure to visual arts in elementary schools, so as necessary to allow students to familiarize themselves with creative forms of self-expression. On that note, visual arts must be advocated for, making teachers the most important individuals for headlining that initiative. Therefore, as part of my methods and procedures, it was important to connect with elementary school teachers to learn more about their opinions and approaches toward visual art and its relationship to education. An anonymous online survey was sent out to approximately thirty teachers who work at a single elementary school within Monterey County (see appendix A). The purpose of this survey was to get opinions on visual arts and education from professional educators

who already have substantial knowledge and experience in the education field. My procedure for interpreting the results from this survey involved synthesizing each of the teachers' responses to the questions in order to generalize upon some common themes that each of them shared.

Additionally, I planned to conduct in-person interviews with three to five of the teachers from this same elementary school; however, I only managed to complete one due to the COVID-19 pandemic causing a shutdown of all Monterey County school districts for an extended period of time. During this one interview, I asked the same questions as what was in the anonymous online survey but aimed to elicit more elaborate and detailed responses. Also, after being able to synthesize the responses from the anonymous online survey, I was able to prompt the interviewed teacher with some additional follow up questions, as necessary for clarification.

Alongside this fieldwork, I also conducted supporting research by obtaining information from several scholarly resources such as online peer reviewed journal articles, books and other academic materials at my disposal. All the information from these sources relate to visual arts, education, and/or the relationship between the two. Most of these resources were written between 2010 and 2020, and come from organizations and authors that either advocate for the importance of visual arts or are highly involved in the educational field. The purpose of using these resources is to elevate the benefits of visual arts on elementary school students to a larger societal level by bringing in a knowledge base from experts in multiple fields.

Results, Findings & Discussion

After conducting extensive research through the online sources, survey, and in-person interviews, I can conclude that visual arts can be beneficial to elementary school students in several different ways. On that note, it is generally agreed upon by educators that the reduction of visual arts in elementary schools has been indirectly consequential to students and that there is a

welcoming attitude towards re-integrating visual arts to a point where it can be most effective. The following information will elaborate this statement in conjunction with my secondary research questions, which aim to explore the benefits of visual arts, reasons for its decline, how it can be integrated into curriculum, and how it can be maintained.

1. What does research say about the benefits of visual arts in elementary schools?

There is mounting evidence that advocates for a stronger link between visual arts and education because it can significantly have a positive impact on students' academic performance in schools. One of these impacts include: increasing their motivation for learning by teaching problem solving skills through the creative processes they engage with while creating various forms of visual art. Cornett (2015) argues that this “ignites curiosity and thus motivates students to employ the highest levels of thinking” (p.37). Along the lines of elevating student achievement, it is also maintained that some of the most difficult to reach students can be easily engaged when infusing academic studies with arts-based content and practices (Cornett, 2015). A similar view was shared by one of my anonymous online survey respondents, Teacher E, who maintained that students who find core academic subjects challenging may excel in art and therefore have more “opportunities to shine.”

The arts convey knowledge and meaning not learned through the study of other subjects. Study in and through the arts employs a form of thinking and a way of knowing based on human judgment, invention, and imagination. Arts education offers students the opportunity to envision, set goals, determine a method to reach a goal and try it out, identify alternatives, evaluate, revise, solve problems, imagine, work collaboratively, and apply self-discipline (Visual and Performing Arts Content Standards for California Public Schools, 2001, p. 4.)

As previously mentioned in the literature review, visual arts also allow students to develop creative and flexible forms of thinking, observe, innovate, and reflect, all through the general exposure to an aesthetic experience (National Art Education Association, 2016).

Furthermore, an aesthetic experience is a part of every human being and is a fundamental aspect of health, well-being, and learning (Magsamen, 2019). It is something that is highly

important for the brain. Magsamen (2019) says that “We take in the world through our senses and make meaning through cognition. The interplay results in an aesthetic experience unique to each of us” (para. 11). In other words, there are no criteria for creating visual arts. Instead, it is viewed as something that is interpreted individually which essentially makes it their own, and that is perhaps the greatest advantage because it yields an equitable learning environment for all individuals through their own access points (Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM, 2019). It is also important to note that visual art is a universal concept; the practices of which have been shared in many cultures all around the world. Not only is this the case today, but it has been the case for as far back as mankind goes. The point is, mankind has used visual art as a primary form of representation which, in a sense, documents our history, and it becomes important, especially in a learning environment, for students to learn, partake, and appreciate.

2. Following the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), how do they impact the instruction of visual arts in elementary school classrooms?

Alongside supporting information from online scholarly research, this question was primarily answered through the literature review and by the teachers who participated in the anonymous online survey as well as the in-person interviews. The following is a summary of that information: The NCLB legislation and the Every Student Succeeds Act are both policies that have significantly affected the presence of visual art in elementary school classrooms. NCLB was a way for the federal government to increase its influence over the public education system. It also gave them the ability to hold schools accountable for student performance. This policy allowed the use of test scores in language arts and mathematics to measure the overall performance of schools. Schools were required to document evidence of adequate yearly progress which primarily came

about through administering occasional benchmarks to students throughout the year. Upon synthesizing the teachers' responses to this question in the online survey, the consensus was that NCLB was particularly viewed as a threat and essentially narrowed the educational curriculum. As mentioned in the literature review, schools that appear to show no evidence of improvement throughout the year were put on a probationary period where they were told that there needs to be improvement under the threat of losing federal funding. Consequently, "the time crunch and pressure to bring up state test scores caused districts to focus on reading and writing and math almost exclusively. This created a system with little to no time for other inspiring areas including art, music, science and history" (Online Survey Teacher Respondent E, personal communication, 3 March 2020). The Every Student Succeeds act (ESSA) was, in a sense, a reversal of NCLB. This act scaled back the federal government's role in holding schools accountable and gave the states more flexibility on deciding which educational approaches they can take. Because of this, states can determine methods that work best for students in their populations. It also ensures consideration for disadvantaged students such as English language learners, minorities, etc., and provides funding for many programs that support education. Initially, I was under the impression that ESSA was fixing this issue, but upon research, I found that even though states have more flexibility, one thing for certain is that there is still a greater focus on certain curricular subjects. One teacher who responded to the online survey said, "These legislations have pushed more pencil/paper activities for assessment purposes, leaving the complimentary arts curriculum to suffer" (Online Survey Teacher Respondent A, personal communication, 1 March 2020). Another respondent mentioned "More focus is put on Language Arts and Math due to these policies. All other subjects get minimal time. In many low performing schools, they only teach Language Arts and Math because that's what on the state test, so that's how school performance is measured.

Very few schools have visual arts. It's not on the state testing, so it's not prioritized in the curriculum" (Online Survey Teacher Respondent G, personal communication, 8 March 2020). The key word is "these." Most teacher respondents mentioned that "these" legislations have both created pressure, a time crunch, and dedication to language arts and mathematics. ESSA did not change anything along that line. What did change is how states hold their schools accountable. All in all, while ESSA is a bit more beneficial as opposed to NCLB, both legislations entail enough to keep visual arts in the background as opposed to the frontlines where many educators argue it should be.

3. If visual arts are beneficial to elementary school students, how does the lack of such affect them?

The purpose of this question was to find out more about the consequences students face when having less exposure to visual arts because of curriculum changes due to policy legislation. Primarily, this question was answered through the online survey with teachers. Overall, the biggest theme gathered from each of the teacher respondents is that a lack of visual arts takes away the opportunity for students to be creative and self-expressive. The following information, as gathered from the online survey teacher respondents, dives more specifically into their opinions over this issue. Teacher A said that when students do not have a creative outlet, their emotional growth is hindered. As a result, teachers struggle to teach students to manage their behavior in part because the system today does not nurture their creativity and give them an outlet through the arts (Online Survey Teacher Respondent A, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020). Teacher B mentioned that many students are visual learners and would benefit more from the possibilities that visual arts can provide (Online Survey Teacher Respondent B, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020). Teacher C maintained a similar sentiment, stating that each individual student has a unique

learning style and that taking away the visual arts is thwarting a complete understanding for those students who learn best through hands-on curriculum (Online Survey Teacher Respondent C, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020). Teacher D made a case that visual arts are a necessary aspect for developing important parts of the brain (Online Survey Teacher Respondent D, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020). This teacher has similar views to one of my previous mentions of a scholarly source that focuses on the impacts of visual arts on the brain and overall human health (See Magsamen, 2019). Teacher E reiterated that visual arts can provide an outlet for students who do not excel well in regular academic instruction by giving them more opportunities to engage their learning in creative ways. Having less of those opportunities would make it more likely for students to fall behind in their learning (Online Survey Teacher Respondent E, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020) Teacher F tied this into more of a human and universal concept, stating:

Visual arts are integral to the human experience. A strong liberal arts program includes visual arts. This program works best when incorporated into daily, weekly, monthly, and annual curriculum. Students who are not exposed to, supported in, and practicing visual arts are working in a deficit culturally and globally. Students find their people in the arts and will feel better supported to grow and learn (Online Survey Teacher Respondent F, personal communication, 7 March 2020).

Lastly, teacher G expressed a similar opinion to teacher E, saying that less visual art would mean there are less opportunities for creativity and appreciation for the arts (Online Survey Teacher Respondent G, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020 & Online Survey Teacher Respondent E, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020). Some students are gifted or can shine in the arts and without the opportunity, they may never realize their talent.

4. If visual arts are important, could teachers integrate it into their daily instruction of other subjects? If so, how?

Research maintains that visual arts can and should be integrated into the elementary school curriculum. Despite the setbacks that limit visual arts in elementary school classrooms, integration

is possible and very beneficial when placed with other curricular subjects. The arts have been found to contribute to more active learning, especially when used as a method for reinforcing a concept from another subject area (Myers, 2010). Most teacher respondents from the online survey agreed that visual arts integration is not impossible. Many of these teachers mentioned that while it is difficult to integrate art on a daily basis, as they are hoping to do more regularly, they do have integrated art lessons on occasion. For example, teacher D mentioned using symmetry and graphing art for mathematics, creating visual art for language arts stories, and placing salt on a watercolor painting to see the effects, or the “science” behind it (Online Survey Teacher Respondent D, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020). Teacher C gave another example regarding mathematics. This teacher mentioned that his/her students were learning about fractions, and in order to help them grasp the concept of “numerator” and “denominator,” or “how much of something you have out of how much all together,” they got to create fraction flowers. For this project, the students would sketch out a flower with however many petals they wanted. Then, they would paint a certain number of petals one color and the remaining petals a different color. The students then had to label each petal with a fraction. For example, if a student drew ten petals and painted four of them red and six of them yellow, they would label each petal one tenth and summarize that four tenths of the petals are red, and six tenths of the petals are yellow (Online Survey Teacher Respondent C, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020). The moral here is that teacher C is using visual art to reinforce a concept in math. This is benefiting students because they are the ones who got to create the work themselves. They got to choose how many petals, what fraction to make, and what colors to paint with. This goes back to an earlier statement where I mentioned that visual art is an individual process. Furthermore, Teacher F maintained that visual arts should support the topics, themes, and curriculum by showing a strong link. This teacher also

provided an example, saying that “Black history month or women in history come to mind as a place to validate the worth of exposing scholars to art linked to history. This can segue into student created art inspired by the visual pieces we present” (Online Survey Teacher Respondent F, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020). Many respondents also wrote about the need for more time, opportunities, and materials because that especially, is necessary for integrating visual art into all other curricular areas of academic instruction in elementary schools.

5. What could teachers do to ensure visual arts remain in the curriculum to benefit students’ learning?

This final question was primarily answered by the online survey teacher respondents. From what I gathered collectively from each of the respondents, if visual arts are going to be maintained in a school curriculum, its value must be seen. It is important to note that the elementary school in which these teacher respondents work has been able to maintain visual arts to a great degree. Though this does not happen daily in the students’ classrooms, they are generally afforded more opportunities to partake in visual arts activities as compared to other schools. This school has an art teacher who is funded by a parent-teacher organization. Teachers from all grade levels can make monthly appointments for their classes to visit the art teacher for lessons in visual art. On that note, teacher G maintains that educators must:

Continue to show parents the benefits of the program and their children’s love for it. If the parents see the value, they’ll donate. I regularly send pictures home of students creating art in art class and we also have an art show at the end of the year (Online Survey Teacher Respondent G, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020).

Furthermore, teacher B expresses a similar view by stating that educators should also “encourage administration and board members that visual arts are an integral component to a well-rounded education, and cutting these programs inhibits students from performing well” (Online Survey Teacher Respondent B, Personal Communication, 7 March 2020). A handful of other teacher

respondents mentioned the need to sit down and carefully consider how visual arts can tie into lessons from other subject matters like language arts, mathematics, and science while planning. In other words, they want to maintain visual arts by finding ways to use it to enhance students' understanding of the concepts they are learning. Lastly, the teacher who I was able to interview in person clarified earlier statements from the online survey teacher respondents and mentioned that access to supplies and materials are the biggest hurdle for teachers that are trying to pursue the arts. Perhaps because of budget, lack of time, other priorities with curriculum etc. On that note, this teacher re-enforces the idea that it is important for teachers, administrators, and parents to see the value that visual arts can bring to students, so as to provide more opportunities for visual arts to be a part of schools in the future.

Discussion

It is without doubt that visual arts can be beneficial to elementary school students. The research shows that these benefits contribute to an improvement of students' academic performance and overall health. In my opinion, creativity and self-expression are key developmental essentials, especially for elementary school students because finding what works for them is important. Visual art gives them many opportunities for finding their voice, which can lead to self-confidence and independence.

Many teacher respondents agreed that the benefits of visual art significantly outweigh any rationale that speaks otherwise. Policy changes such as NCLB negatively impacted the instruction and availability of visual arts in schools across the country by throwing it into the background and placing higher emphasis and importance on language arts and mathematics. Many teacher respondents agreed that this legislation was more harmful than it was helpful. It is my view that a

well-rounded education should not only focus on language arts and mathematics and that assessment of students' performance should not be solely based on those two subjects alone.

Assessments should not be for determining the amount of funding schools receive but should instead be used as a means for understanding the ways students learn and think so as to provide a curriculum that best accommodates their learning styles.

It was generally agreed that ESSA provides more freedom and takes into consideration the different circumstances surrounding schools regarding their performance. Despite this, state testing is still a requirement in each state, so one thing that has not changed is the allocation of time throughout the school year for subject matters that are assessed. Though ESSA defines visual arts as part of a well-rounded education, it remains relatively in the background. When students have less exposure to visual arts, they are losing an outlet for creativity and self-expression. It is important to note that students learn in different ways. Some of the teacher respondents mentioned that it can be beneficial for students who have difficulty excelling in regular academic subjects, and visual art can be a way for them to learn concepts in a different way that is perhaps more understandable to them. There is extensive research that supports art integration in elementary school classrooms, especially when paired with other subject matters. From both the research and teacher respondents, it is agreed that connecting visual arts with other subject matters can enhance students' understanding and comprehension of what they are learning.

Despite this being possible, what makes it difficult is the pressure to prepare students for state testing, the time crunch to do so, and the lack of materials. Even so, the best way to include and maintain visual arts in an elementary school classroom is to advocate for it by showing its value. Educators, administrators, parents, and even state or federal officials need to see evidence

that visual arts play a significant role in education because they are highly influential sources that can help bring it into the curriculum whether through grants, fundraising, etc.

Problems and Limitations

Over the course of developing the research for my senior capstone report, I did encounter a couple of setbacks that minimally affected the quality of work I was able to present. Starting first with the anonymous online survey, approximately thirty teachers from one elementary school in the Monterey County area received a link to the online questions. After a two-week period, I only got a total of seven responses back. While this number is relatively lower than what I was anticipating, the amount of information I received collectively from each respondent was enough in helping me with my research. As I previously mentioned in the methods and procedures section of this report, my goal was to synthesize the responses from the online survey in order to draw out some common themes related to each of the questions asked. Fortunately, I was able to do so with each question given, despite the low amount of responses from teachers.

Also, in my initial plan, I intended on interviewing three to five elementary school teachers in person. These teachers would have been from the same elementary school that I conducted the online survey at; however, my goal for the in-person interviews was to go more in depth and prompt additional questions that would help clarify the responses I received online. In terms of what I have included in this report, I was only able to interview one teacher in person. This was due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic causing a closure to the CSUMB campus, a shift from in-person instruction to an online modality, and the closure of all schools in Monterey County due to a mandated statewide stay-at-home order for the time being. Nonetheless, despite having only been able to conduct one in-person interview, the additional information I received from the interviewed teacher was highly beneficial and I was still able to use the additional information to support my

research.

Recommendations

In light of the fact that visual arts can bring many benefits to elementary school students, my recommendations follow suit with my fourth and fifth secondary research questions, which focus on the ways in which visual arts can be connected to other subjects and how it can be maintained in elementary schools. In general, teacher collaboration is an essential part of school systems. As mentioned before, if visual arts are going to be incorporated and maintained in elementary schools, the initiative must be headlined by teachers. The first step involves identifying what resources are available and then carefully considering how those resources can be used to implement visual arts into other subject matters. This would involve teachers planning together and generating ideas off one another; not only to be on the same page, but also to develop strategies that will best support arts integration in favor of students' learning.

My second recommendation involves the importance of elevating visual arts to a higher level. This is referring beyond teachers in the classroom. By higher level, I mean parents and administrators at all levels including those who work in district offices, state government positions, and federal government positions. People need to see the value of visual arts. People need to see that it is worth being a part of the curriculum. Even schools at an institutional level can support this idea. For example, I mentioned earlier in the report about one of the online survey teacher respondents who wrote about how the school he/she teaches at has a yearly art show that displays the masterpieces created throughout the year by students from all grade levels. The point is, if people begin to see the value that visual arts can bring, more support will be given for it to be included and maintained in elementary schools. Perhaps parent-teacher organizations can create

fundraisers to support art programs for schools. State and federal organizations can work to develop grants that support visual arts programs. Lastly, I think it is also important for research on the benefits of visual art to continue so that educators today and in the future can build a collective knowledge base in favor of making positive education change.

Conclusion

All too often, visual arts have been set aside from the educational curriculum. They have been placed in the background at the expense of policy changes that stress more importance on other curricular subjects which cause educators to have to allocate more time and focus on those instead. However, there is a strong case that runs in favor of including visual arts as part of the curriculum with mounting evidence that suggests they can in fact be beneficial to elementary school students in several ways. These benefits include an exposure to creativity and self-expression which, as mentioned, provides students with a unique sense of individuality, an increase in academic performance which argues that visual arts can be a useful tool for students who learn visually or who struggle with regular academic instruction, and an overall boost for their brain and health due to the fact that visual arts allows flexible forms of thinking, observing, envisioning, innovating, and reflecting, through their own aesthetic experiences (National Art Education Association, 2016).

Given these benefits, it becomes important to bring visual arts back into elementary schools. One of the most useful ways of doing so is by tying it into other curricular subjects. This involves the need for educators to regularly collaborate with each other in order to plan and facilitate the best strategies for doing so. Additionally, the topic of visual art must go beyond the classroom, and its value and worth must be seen from all viewpoints. It needs to be elevated to a higher status and be given a louder voice. Parents, administrators, state and federal officials have

to be able to see and hear that visual art is something desired among elementary schools because only then, will there be a greater likelihood of obtaining more resources that support visual arts implementation. These resources might include fundraising initiatives and grants that support hiring art teachers, funding art materials, and sustaining art programs and events. All in all, visual arts need to be a regular part of curriculum in elementary schools because not only does it benefit students' learning, but it is also fun, enjoyable, and something they will never forget.

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Appendix A
Anonymous Online Teacher Interview Questions

1. In your opinion, what are some ways in which policy change, such as the No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) affect visual arts in schools

2. If visual arts are beneficial to elementary school students, how does the lack of such affect them?

3. If visual arts are important, could you integrate it into your daily instruction of other subject matters? If so, how?

4. could you do to ensure that visual arts remain in the curriculum to benefit students' learning?

Appendix B
In-Person Teacher Interview Questions

1. What are some ways in which you feel visual arts can be beneficial to elementary school students?

2. In your opinion, what are some ways in which policy change, such as the No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) affect visual arts in schools

3. If visual arts are beneficial to elementary school students, how does the lack of such affect them?

4. If visual arts are important, could you integrate it into your daily instruction of other subject matters? If so, how?

5. What could you do to ensure that visual arts remain in the curriculum to benefit students' learning?

