

Theatre Arts Programs: Impact of Cognitive Development in Elementary School Students

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Abstract

As result of the 2001 legislation, No Child Left Behind elementary schools across the United States focus has turned to testing and accountability often neglecting arts in education. Despite numerous studies of the benefits that the arts can have not only in the social-emotional development of students but in conjunction with the recent research that shows the arts effect on cognitive development these programs are continually being cut.

The purpose of this study is to put the spotlight on the scientific evidence that connects a student's involvement in arts education with the increase in cognitive development. It is crucial to make this information widespread as it will help to put weight behind the urgent need of policy reform and monetary support so that every child is given the chance to experience arts in schools.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Having grown up with the opportunity to experience well-founded, high performing theatre arts program in my school, I received firsthand knowledge of the impact it made on me and my classmates. Through songs and lines my memorization skills grew at a very early age. I was interested in learning to read and always wanted to be able to decode the words from the plays myself.

By participating in dance lessons, voice training, and rehearsals I developed my skills to concentrate and focus my attention that directly helped my own study skills in the classroom. As my time in theatre arts grew my confidence in my own voice grew as well. My strength in class was participation and working in teams. Theatre built my skills in public speaking, which I found enormously helpful in both my academic and professional career.

Theatre arts not only helped my academic development but taught me the understanding of empathy towards others and importance of cultural diversity. These themes were ingrained into the curriculum through the plays we participated in. Furthering that, understanding through the portrayal of characters, gave us lifelong knowledge that was not seen with in the other areas of our elementary curriculum.

The experience that I had in theatre arts during elementary schools shaped by ability to perform well academically in school but giving me the skills of concentration and dedication to learning something new. It is vital that all students have the opportunity to have the same experience that I had throughout their time in elementary school.

Statement of Problem

With the growing budget cuts in the public school system and the focus of educators on standards and testing, theatre arts programs are not making the cut. Policy makers, school boards, and the community are unaware of the impact these programs can have not only with enriching the environment of a school but also on the cognitive development in early elementary school students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to articulate the cognitive development skills that are gained when children participate in theatre arts programs. With the proper articulation, I can use this study as an advocacy platform to raise funding for such programs.

Research Question

How do elementary school theatre arts programs impact the cognitive development skills in children? Looking past the engagement aspect of afterschool programs, what scientific evidence suggest that participating in theatre arts will improve student's development academically in turn impacting students test scores. How can this information be articulated successfully to the community and policy makers so that programs such as these, often deemed extracurricular are exempt from budget cuts.

Theoretical Rationale

To understand the significance of theatre arts programs on cognitive development in student's one can look back to Jean Piaget and his developmental theory. Piaget's theory of cognitive development explores how humans develop to their environment over time (as cited by Huitt &

Hummel, 2003). Piaget wanted to see how behavior or adaptation to the environment is controlled through the mind. The theory continues to describe that all experiences that an organism (child) has get categorized so that in turn the person can use different experiences to represent the world and designate action. This adaptation is driven by a biological drive to obtain balance between the areas and the environment (equilibration). Piaget described two processes used by the individual in its ability to attempt to adapt: assimilation and accommodation. Both of these processes are used throughout life as the person increasingly adapts to the environment in a more complex manner (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

Assimilation is the process of using or changing the environment so that it can be placed in cognitive structures that already exist. Accommodation is the process of transforming cognitive structures in order to acknowledge something from the environment (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). For the purpose of this paper I will focus on the aspects of Piaget's theory that deal with the development in children and the parts of the brain that process information, learn languages and think conceptually. Piaget's theory is under the umbrella of neuroscience and psychology.

This paper includes the social cognitive learning theory of Albert Bandura. Bandura's theory (Boeree, 2006) uses an experimental approach to focus on the behavior of people. His theory is to see if the environment a person is in will affect their behavior. Bandura did a study on aggressive modeling, that when children observed an adult being aggressive they performed in the same way. The social cognitive learning theory states that if people are persuaded they have what it takes to succeed they exert more effort and avoid focusing on their doubts when a problem arises (Boeree, 2006).

Assumptions

The assumption is that the greater community views theatre arts in schools is a ‘perk,’ rather than an essential component of a well-rounded curriculum. By the lack of funding the government for arts programs the assumption is that these programs only teaches students how to act, project, and be theatrical, but will not have a direct impact on students academics or testing scores.

Theatre arts programs are not seen as having direct implications on students understanding and comprehension of academic concepts.

Background and Need

With the state of educational funding being cut every which way the performing arts are currently having limited to no presence at elementary schools across the county. The effect of the lack of theatre arts programs not only is hindering our student’s appreciation and understanding of this important artistic aspect of our society but it could be causing a unique learning experience to be missed. A recent study conducted by Stanford University undertook a series of tests to “investigate how aesthetic ability and arts education correlate with improvements in children’s reading abilities” (Wandell, Dougherty, Ben-Shachar, Deutsch, Tsang, 2001). The study looked at 49 children, ages 7 to 12 who were enrolled in a trail of examining the development of reading skills and the brain structures. Parents were surveyed on the extent of the children exposed to the arts and their openness and temperament to the experience. The data was then linked between children’s arts training with their test scores in reading fluency and phonological awareness over a three-year period. The results signify that the amount of “musical training the children underwent in the first year of the study correlated with the amount of improvements in the children’s read fluency” (Wandell et al., 2001). Studies such as this are the beginning steps to reengaging the conversation over arts education. With scientific

evidence that arts education can academically help students, in turn raising test scores the hope is that funding for these types of programs will be reinstated in elementary schools.

Another significant element to this paper is the 'I care' theory that theatre arts programs have been linked to instilling into students. There have been numerous reports over the years of increasing school drop-out rate increasing and students becoming more disengaged with the school work. The "I care" theory is that sometimes it just takes one teacher, class, elective, sports team, or theatre arts program to get a student to start thinking "I care." Finding the thing you care about can often be the key to the castle of a child's education. When a student finds something they are passionate about it can drastically change their entire perspective of school. Often is discussed that schools and teachers need to strive to differentiate instruction within the classroom in an attempt to reach the most amounts of students with varying learning styles. Schools need to also offer a variety of activities that can engage students who might not be finding that engagement within the classroom setting. Theatre Arts programs can and often are the outlet that students need to keep a vested interest in school. With the cutting of arts programs in most schools across the country not only are we denying students the opportunity to experience a well rounded education but perhaps stifling a passion that they have yet to experience.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

Much research has been conducted on the effects theater arts education has on students' performance academically. This chapter will review the history of theater arts education in public schools, give a detailed description of the current guidelines and standards for theater arts as mandated by the state of California, and shed light on prominent studies showing the effect theater arts has on legislation, cognition, comprehension, and language. For the purpose of this study the literature reviewed in this section will focus primarily on elementary-age students without special needs or other considerations needed.

Historical Overview of the Arts

There has been a progression of arts education from the 1900s to present day. Prior to the turn of the century the arts entered the school system through technical drawing and drafting as a means to practical training for future employment. After the industrial area the economy had grown and leisure activities that once were for the upper class only became part of the curriculum in the public education system. John Dewey (as cited in Heilig, Cole, & Aguilar, 2010) was a pioneer for arts education with his research done at the University of Chicago. It was there that Dewey developed his theory of progressive education that "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" (as cited in Heilig et al., 2010, p.137). Dewey's theory as cited in (Heilig et al., 2010) was embraced by the school systems and children were given access to the arts marking the first time that arts were recognized as contributing to other subject areas.

By the end of the 1920s arts were seen in almost every school and teachers, curriculum, classrooms and supplies were designated to the teaching of the arts. When the great depression struck the country schools were closed, teachers fired and budgets severely cut (Heilig et al., 2010). Arts programs in schools became almost obsolete besides the community, volunteer based curriculum that were seen sporadically across the country. It wasn't until the 1950's that arts were even mentioned in school budgets. By the 1950s the economy was booming again and the United States Government was able to redistribute funds to schools that could bring back specialized teachers and art programs (Heilig et al., 2010). Then came the blow that would change arts education for decades to come, Sputnik. When the Soviet Union beat out the United States in the space war the country saw this as a disaster in the public educational system. Math and science became the big push in curriculum and arts were back out the door. With this defeat in the presence of arts in education rose the desire for lobbyist to join forces and put pressure on the United States government to create influence on local agencies on the distribution of moneys toward arts education. The United States Office of Education conducted research on the impact that arts made in education and in 1965 the government agency the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was formed so that arts education would be represented on school campuses. Despite the NEA arts education was still under local purview under the constitution and other federal laws (Heilig et al., 2010).

It was not until the 1980s with the election of Ronald Regan that arts saw a real increase in schools. Regan appointed Frank Hodsoll as the head of the NEA and a big study entitled *Toward Civilization: A Report on Arts Education*. "The report claimed that arts education in America was in 'triple jeopardy' because the arts are not viewed as serious, knowledge itself is

not viewed as prime educational objective, and those who determine school curricula do not agree on what arts education is” (as cited in Heilig et al., 2010, p. 138).

The policies that the Regan administration set in the 80’s helped the federal government have a stronger presence in arts education in the 90s. In 1994, the National Voluntary K-12 Standards for the arts were published. From these standards congress signed the Goals 2000: Educate America Act into law (Heilig et al., 2010, p. 138). Section 102 of the law states that by 2000 all students will demonstrate competency over challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography. This marked the first federal presence in placing arts in the core curriculum of school standards (Heilig et al., 2010).

In 2002, George W. Bush signed into place the education act known as No Child Left Behind. This high stakes testing has had distractions effects for the past 8 years on not only the significance of arts education seen in public schools curriculum but on the funding as well (Heilig et al., 2010). Although arts education has taken leaps forward with the federal presence of the NEA and recognition designation for the arts it is clear that the focus in most schools is on NCLB which does not allow for such ‘extras’ as music, dance, painting, or theatre.

Arts and Legislation

On October 1, 2009 members of the California Arts Council (C.A.C.) approved a resolution for arts education and its importance in grades k-12 (State of California, 2011). The resolution proclaimed that arts are significant in the growth of creativity among students making them better prepared for our ever-changing global economy. The commission stated that having a consistent art program in grades k-12 can lead to a life-long appreciation of arts and a more invested effort towards school in general. The council resolved that providing children a

foundation in the arts can offer students, “critical thinking skills, establishes self-worth and confidence, encourages teamwork, teaches skills like public speaking and organization, and offers a productive environment for students to express themselves”(State of California, 2011, para. 6). The resolution states that student’s involvement in arts programs and student performances can lead to stronger community pride, more parental participation, strong and safe afterschool programs and a greater dignity in our school system. The council states that, “Studies indicate that when taking standardized tests such as the Scholastic Achievement Test (S.A.T.) students who study the visual and performing arts outperform their peers who do not have arts education” (State of California, 2011, para. 3).

The U.S. Department of Education cites the Arts as a core subject, on the same level as English, Math and Science (State of California, 2011, para. 1). The California Educational code adopted state standards in 2001 which were published in 2004 stating that schools shall provide instruction in the arts including the subjects of dance, music, theatre and visual arts. In fact both the California State University and University of California systems require a full year of visual and performing arts be completed before consideration for admissions is made. In recent reports more than 89% of California k-12 schools were providing adequate instruction in the core subject of arts. “The 2009-10 state budget allows school districts to reallocate Music and Arts block grant funding for non-arts education purposes, potentially decreasing the quality and number of schools providing arts education” (State of California, 2011, para. 2).

The California Arts Council recommended in the proclamation that certain steps be made to ensure Visual and Performing Arts were being taught in the public education school system. These steps included the recognition of arts as a core subject and the application of the state art content standards in each and every school (State of California, 2011). The council would like to

enforce that school districts administrators be prohibited from sharing funds from the Art and Music Block Grant for anything other than direct arts education. The council concludes its recommendations with the suggestions that schools find partnerships within the art community so that every child in California may receive a well-rounded and complete education (State of California, 2011).

The proclamation was addressed to the following individuals and groups: Governor of California, California Department of Education, California Board of Education, Members of the California Legislature, California Secretary of Education, state school-district superintendents, school board members, arts education advocates, community arts organization leaders, and California citizens concerned about education issues and the arts (State of California, 2011).

Arts and Cognitive Development

The cognitive development of a child including language learning, conceptual resources, and developmental skills is the foundation of how a child conceptualizes the world around them and is able to take in new information to process. Controversy within cognitive development has stemmed from the “nature versus nurture” theory (Piaget, 1975) although it has been widely believed by many experts there is no dichotomy when it comes to a child’s cognitive development. A blending of a person’s genetic composition along with the experiences they have in the world around them help to create their development.

Theater arts have been thought to influence the cognitive process through “the underlying mechanism of attention” (Posner, Rothbart, Sheese, & Kieras, 2008, p.1). In a study conducted at the University of Oregon researchers sought to find if involvement in theater arts creates motivation in students that sustains their attention (Posner et al., 2008). A questionnaire was administered to students that measured whether or not the appreciation of a type of art was

related to the pleasure in producing that specific type of art (Posner et al., 2008). The study found that the aesthetic activity correlated with the aesthetic interest of a specific art form. This means that students that think of themselves in a creative way, who enjoy specific artistic leisure activities can associate themselves with creating their own artistic interpretations. For example, students who think they are creative and enjoy listening to music can see themselves learning to play a musical instrument. Understanding that students with an innate interest in the arts have a correlation with their interest or motivation of producing art is vital for parents and educators to understand.

Another study found that children four to seven years old that were given rewards and positive feedback led to a greater level of motivation and improvements in their sustained attention (Posner et al., 2008). To test this they used electroencephalograms placed on children's heads, recording the electrical activity of the student's brains. The children that were given prior attention training showed higher levels of brain activity when simple tests were given (Posner et al., 2008). This test "suggests that arts training works through the training of attention to improve cognition for children with interests and abilities in the arts" (Posner et al., 2008, p.8).

Harnessing a child's imagination at a young age and teaching that child how to use their innate artistic side in a constructive way can also show an improvement in cognitive development. In a study by Fink (1976) 36 children were chosen randomly and assigned to one of three groups. Group one had specific training in imaginative play with adults present; Group two had free play with no direct adult presence; Group three was the control group. Observations were made before, during, and after the experiment, over the course of a month. The results of this experiment showed that children can be taught constructive behaviors of imaginative play and that "coached imaginative play contributes to important social

developments of children” (Fink, 1976, p.1). It is vital that schools provide opportunities for children to develop their imaginative play skills to better understand the world around them in their own terms and in terms of the other players in the classroom, or on the stage.

In 2004 the Dana Arts brought together neuroscientists from seven universities to try to solve the question of why arts training are linked with high academic performance. Through a vast and complex series of experiments they came up with several results to indicate that there is a correlation between the arts and high academic performance. One study found that performing arts increased motivation and sustained attention necessary for academic performance and interpretation of new information (Gazzaniga, 2008). “Training and acting appears to lead to memory improvement through the learning of general skills for manipulating semantic information” (Gazzaniga, 2008, p. 6).

Throughout the studies mentioned above scientific evidence can support a correlation between artistic involvement (i.e. imaginative play, acting training, performance studies, etc.) and a child’s cognitive development through higher motivation and increased sustained attention. Having higher motivation and increased sustained attention leads to higher academic performance.

Arts and Comprehension

Drama programs within the classroom can have a great impact on the development of reading comprehension skills, including an increase in the reading comprehension section of standardized tests.

A study conducted in the Chicago public school system examined the impact of Worldwinds Reading Comprehension Through Drama program on fourth grade student’s reading skills and standardized test scores (Parks & Rose, 1997). This study consisted of a ten-week

drama program held inside the classroom for two hours a week. Four classes of fourth grade students worked with professional artists on acting skills, physical and vocal gains. At the end of the ten weeks students were given a section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (I.T.B.S.) designed to measure basic comprehension. Participants reading comprehension scores on the I.T.B.S. improved three months more (in the standard grade level metric) with high statistical significance (Parks & Rose, 1997). The scores improved the most with respect to student ability to identify factual information from written text. This study is a clear advocate for the importance of drama programs in elementary schools, based on its positive results in reading comprehension.

Supporting the notion of arts programs developing increased reading comprehension is a study that took place with a 108 children in grades kindergarten-second in rural northeast Georgia (Pellegrini & Galda, 1982). The children were read books by adults and then broken into three different groups. One group had thematic fantasy play time; the second had a discussion about the story; the last group drew pictures about what they heard. Story comprehension was measured by a criterion-referenced test. Kindergarteners and first graders in the thematic fantasy play group scored higher in story comprehension than their peers in the other two groups (Pellegrini & Galda, 1982). This study shows that children become more effective at obtaining and digesting information when given the opportunity to act it out.

Arts and Language

Performing arts students are often associated with outgoing personalities, good verbal skills, and high participation in classrooms. Their ability to articulate their thoughts and convey their point of view is often associated with their confidence and performing skills gained through theater.

Recent studies are taking this theory and examining the scientific proof that these skills are not merely superficial but hard-wired in their brains.

A study conducted at the University of Toronto looked to discover what the brain-based differences are between performing arts and non-performing arts students. They used a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to help answer this question (Dunbar, 2008). Over three years they developed a verbal version of the “Uses of Objects Task” to administer assessments on 60 students (Dunbar, 2008). Results showed differences in “left-hemisphere frontal lobe activation” that are consistent with the theory that performing arts students are more likely to be engaged in the “symbolic retrieval” (Dunbar, 2008). Differences in other brain areas were not seen. This indicates that it is in the generation of novel ideas and not the responding to novel ideas that is the key difference between the two groups (Dunbar, 2008). The ability to create a novel idea and articulate it clearly and consistently can be attributed to a student’s participation in performing arts.

Not only do theater arts help with the cognitive development of language but also it can increase the type of language used by children. In a study the researchers selected nine schools from city suburban and rural areas, focusing on 11 classes of fifth graders to integrate drama in their language arts curriculum (Schaffner, Little, & Felton, 1984). Teachers were given a two-day workshop on how to integrate drama into their language arts time. Observations were made over two school years with audio-taping as well (Schaffner et al., 1984). The results showed that the language introduced through the drama exercises differed from language use in regular classroom curriculum and also “encouraged desirable types of thinking and cognitive development” (Schaffner et al., 1984, p.1). The most significant difference seen between the ordinary classroom language and the language introduced by the drama activities was that the

language was much more expressive and interactional as opposed to informational. Schaffner et al (1984) stated, “Drama puts back the human content into what is predominately a materialistic curriculum,” (p.1).

Statistical Data

Statistics concerning theater arts programs and student achievement in the classroom show positive links between involvement and student success.

1. Two times more likely to win an award for academic achievement
2. Four times more likely to win school wide attention for academic achievement
3. Four times more likely to participate in a math or science fair
4. Three times more likely to win an award for school attendance
5. Over four times more likely to win an award for an essay or poem
6. Nearly twice as likely to read for pleasure
7. Over three times more likely to be elected to class office in school
8. Over four times more likely to engage in community service
9. Eight times more likely to win a community service award

In his thesis, *Drama Discovery*, Michael Jacobs (as cited in California Education Theatre Arts, [C.E.T.A.] 2008) findings matching the *Critical Links* research as he explored the impact of the dramatic process on the students in his study: young children who engage in dramatic enactments of stories and texts improve their reading comprehension, story understanding and ability to read new materials they have not seen before. The effects are even more significant for children from economically disadvantaged circumstances and those with reading difficulties in the early and middle grades (C.E.T.A., 2008). Learning in individual art forms as well as in multi-arts experiences engages and strengthens such fundamental cognitive capacities as spatial

reasoning (the capacity for organizing and sequencing ideas); conditional reasoning (theorizing about outcomes and consequences); problem-solving; and the components of creative thinking (originality, elaboration, flexibility) (Jacobs as cited in C.E.T.A, 2008).

In a report for Americans for the Arts (2010) shows that students working in the arts for at least three hours on three days of each week for at least one year are:

1. “4 times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement”
2. “3 times more likely to be elected to class office within their schools”
3. “4 times more likely to participate in a math and science fair”
4. “3 times more likely to win an award for school attendance “
5. “4 times more likely to win an award for writing an essay or poem”

(Americans for the Arts, 2010, para.3)

Young artists, as compared with their peers, are likely to:

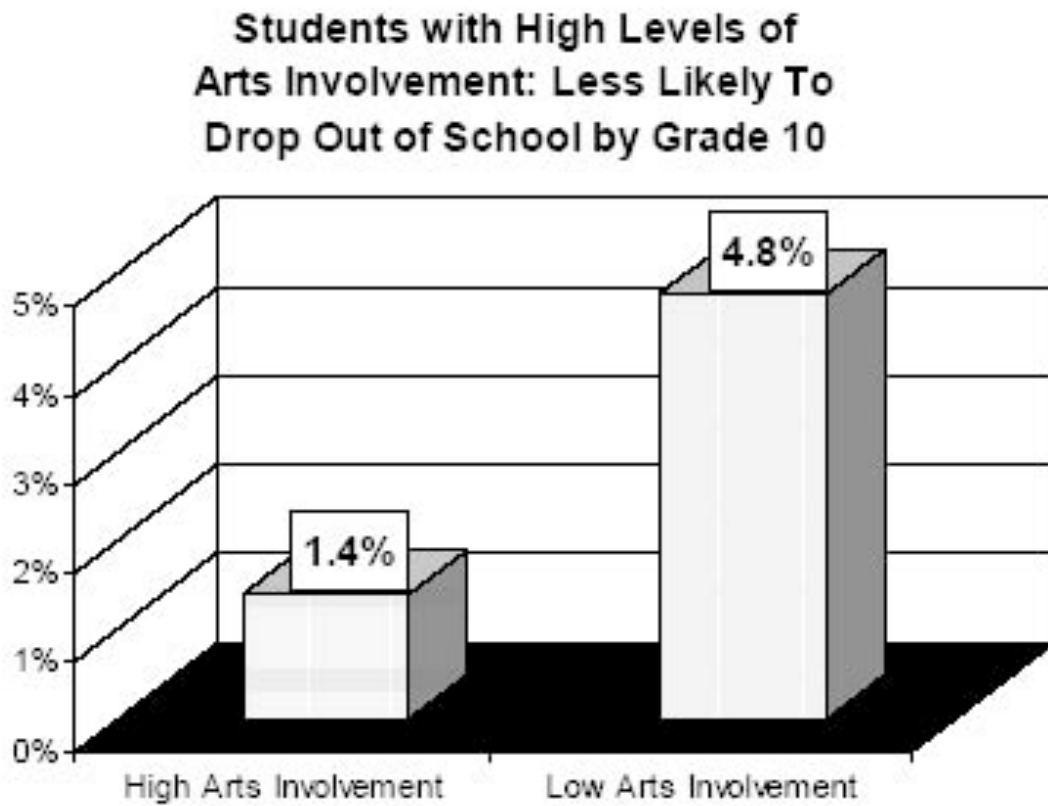
1. Attend music, art, and dance classes nearly three times as frequently
2. Participate in youth groups nearly four times as frequently
3. Read for pleasure nearly twice as often
4. Perform community service more than four times as often

(Heath, Soep, Roach, 1998)

The facts are that arts education...

1. makes a tremendous impact on the developmental growth of every child and has been proven to help level the "learning field" across socio-economic boundaries (Catterall, 1997).
2. has a measurable impact on at-risk youth in deterring delinquent behavior and truancy problems while also increasing overall academic performance among those youth

engaged in afterschool and summer arts programs targeted toward delinquency prevention (Americans for the Arts, 2009).



(Americans for the Arts, 2010).

Administrative Records

According to the California Department of Education (C.D.E., 2010) the California Framework for Visual and Performing Arts for California Public Schools outlines the goals and standards for performing arts education specific to grade levels K-12. This is according to the Educational Code sections 51210 and 51220. Section 51210 specifies that the required adopted course of study used by schools for grades one through six must include the visual and performing arts. Section 51220 specifies the same requirement for grades seven through twelve. As with all other subject areas except physical education, the Education Code does not state the number of minutes of instruction required, although it does require schools to provide instruction in the arts for all students (C.D.E., 2010).

Also in the framework is a section that provides the definition of a balanced, comprehensive arts program arts are studied as discrete disciplines related to each other and, when appropriate, to other subject areas in the curriculum (C.D.E., 2010).

Students in a comprehensive program are expected to master the standards of an arts discipline, which are grouped under the following strands:

1. Artistic perception refers to processing, analyzing, and responding to sensory information through the use of the language and skills unique to dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts.
2. Creative expression involves creating a work, performing, and participating in the arts disciplines. Students apply processes and skills in composing, arranging, and performing a work and use a variety of means to communicate meaning and intent in their own original formal and informal works.

3. Historical and cultural context concerns the work students do toward understanding the historical contributions and cultural dimensions of an arts discipline. Students analyze roles, functions, development in the discipline, and human diversity as it relates to that discipline. They also examine closely musicians, composers, artists, writers, actors, dancers, and choreographers as well as cultures and historical periods.
4. Aesthetic valuing includes analyzing and critiquing works of dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts. Students apply processes and skills to productions or performances. They also critically assess and derive meaning from the work of a discipline, including their own, and from performances and original works based on the elements and principles of an arts discipline, aesthetic qualities, and human responses.
5. Connections, relationships, and applications involve connecting and applying what is learned in one arts discipline and comparing it to learning in the other arts, other subject areas, and careers. Students develop competencies and creative skills in problem solving, communication, and time management that contribute to lifelong learning, including career skills. They also learn about careers in and related to arts disciplines (C.D.E., 2010).

Special Collections

The California Educational Theatre Association (C.E.T.A., 2008) is a statewide organization representing theatre educators across California. The association wrote a proposition paper entitled, “Evaluating the Present: Envisioning the Future of Theatre Arts Education in California,” (C.E.T.A., 2008) as an educational tool for teachers and schools to help in shaping the best ways to incorporate theatre arts into a school’s curriculum. The tips provided in the paper are under the

adopted California State Content Standards and fulfill the state graduation requirement and enter into a state college or university.

The paper begins with an overview of the value currently held of theatre arts education. It takes us back to certain bills and laws created for the benefit of Arts Education. The paper references many organizations that have all produced findings on the benefit arts has on children's education including; how theatre arts allows students to develop and practice basic skills such as problem solving and decision making, the link between academic achievement and arts education, and the improvement of a student's psychological wellbeing while participating in theatre arts programs. The proposition paper then goes on to show the value of theatre arts in today's business world and explain in detail the current status of theatre arts education.

The next section of the paper is entitled "Quality Theatre Education" where the 'keystones' and learning styles of an excellence program are discussed and shared. The paper breaks down the specific elements of a theatre arts program and the elementary, middle and high school levels. The topics within this section include; CA content standards, skills and knowledge, quality teaching, equal access, adequate facilities and time, quality assessment, partnerships, advocacy, and leadership.

The last part of the paper talks about the quality needed in teachers of theatre arts education. The paper advocates for pre-service training and professional development for teaching theatre. The purpose of the proposition paper is to help instill quality and sequential theatre programming in schools across the state of California. The belief is that with the proper education of our students today we can shape our future both economically and culturally (C.E.T.A., 2008).

Interview with an Expert

Sample and Site

This interview was conducted at The Presentation School in northern California. The researcher interviewed Mallory Hoffert (a pseudonym), a seventh grade teacher (Personal communication, March 24, 2011).

Access and Permissions

I had access to interview this teacher based on my current employment within The Presentation School. I asked Ms. Hoffert for permission to interview her via email and followed up in person. I gave her full disclosure of the study and let her know that she was not required to participate. She agreed to the interview.

Ethical Standards

This research study adheres to the principals for protection of human subjects as indicated by the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally, the research proposal was reviewed by the Dominican University Institutional Review Board (IRBPHS), approved, and assigned number 8241.

Mallory Hoffert, Seventh grade teacher at The Presentation School (personal communication, January 15, 2011)

Mallory Hoffert has twenty-one years of experience teaching and has a master's degree in the humanities, with an emphasis in history. She teaches language arts and history to the middle school students and has a strong background in Shakespearean studies. Having been with The Presentation School for over thirteen years she has taught drama classes and assisted in the school productions. She takes the seventh grade class on a week long field trip to the Oregon

Shakespeare Festival every year. She says, “It’s an invaluable experience for children to see the magic of theater. The students read the stories in class but live them at the festival.”

When discussing with Mrs. Hoffert the impact of theater arts programs on the school environment she says that the “whole school seems to come alive at the kinetic energy” when the play is about to premiere. From the excitement of the actors in the show to the curiosity of the other students of what’s behind the curtains, there is a fresh life on campus.

I talked with Mrs. Hoffert about the commitment of the actors in the play and if she noticed a change in their academic performance. She said that although she did not seem a change in their academic performance because of their involvement in the show, all the students that choose to participate are generally already academic and successful.

We then discussed the attributes of the students involved in the theater arts program. I told her that through the research I had done theater arts programs have had a link with healthy social-emotional and behavioral abilities that can lead to an increase in academic achievement. Mrs. Hoffert was not surprised by the data I shared, commenting, “The students involved in the plays are confident. They know who they are and they are proud of what they can accomplish. For the most part they are self-sufficient, committed, and well-spoken.”

When asked about the types of students that participate in theater at The Presentation School, Mrs. Hoffert mentions that most students are already successful at school when they choose to take on such an undertaking, but she has seen many examples over her long career of low performing students venturing out of their comfort zones, participating in a play and finding a new found enthusiasm and energy towards their school. She shared with me the following story about a low performing student who was dealing with her parent’s divorce. “Kaylee started out her seventh grade year with her parent’s divorce. As months went on, she was more

disengaged at school, unmotivated by assignments, and lacking enthusiasm toward her personal learning. I encouraged her to try out for the winter show and she was cast as the lead role. Her involvement in the show created an outlet for her to put her emotions and personal hardships into something productive. She was busy every day after school, causing her to stay on top of her schoolwork because of lack of time. She met many new friends and found a new personal hobby. Kaylee was able to work with her mom on her costume and with her dad on her lines. She had found something neutral that everyone in her life could share excitement over. Her involvement in theater arts reengaged her into her learning, her home life, and her overall attitude towards school. Kaylee went on to pursue acting in high school.”

This interview was reaffirming of the specific and direct qualitative research I was looking for in my own research project. The personal stories and point of view that Mrs. Hoffert provided support the statistical data that I have researched which show theater arts programs have a positive impact on a student’s academic performance.

Summary

Theater arts education is a vital component of a well-rounded curriculum at the elementary-school level. It provides an outlet for expression, creativity, and self-confidence to blossom. The arts have been linked to improved attention and motivation in students, creating a higher level of cognitive development. Including drama in the classroom shows an increase in literary skills, including expressive vocabulary and deeper comprehension of reading. Theater arts programs are vital to the overall health of students, classrooms, and schools.

Chapter 3 Method

The focus of this research project was to explore the impact theatre arts participation in an elementary school setting has on student's classroom engagement. I wanted to examine (a) how students who are playing roles in the school musical alter their academic performance (b) to what extent are students motivated by this extracurricular school related activity (c) how various teachers view the educational role of the play in the classroom setting. My research aimed to answer the question: how does involvement in the school spring musical affect the students in the classroom?

A case study approach was useful for this type of research because this type of research can illustrate situations in which theatre arts programs have been successful in increasing student's engagement and participation in the classroom. I used a qualitative design to conduct this study with elementary school students. These types of study allowed me to interview teachers and observe students and analyze the impact the theatre arts show had on the students.

Sample and Site

The participants are all teachers from a private school within the Sonoma, California school district. Teachers were asked a series of questions pertaining to their students and any noticeable differences seen within their behavior during the course of the play. A convenience sample of Presentation School faculty members and students participated in this study. These participants were selected because they have years of experience teaching in this specific school environment and the students observed participated in the spring musical.

Ethical Standards

All procedures met relevant local, state, and federal regulations regarding use of human subjects in research. The names of participant's have been omitted to protect participants' anonymity. School names and specific locations have been omitted.

Access and Permissions

The teachers interviewed for this project are all acquaintances within The Presentation School. All participants were given a copy of the research participant consent form, which was reviewed with them before signing. After selecting and contacting several teachers, interviews took place. I obtained written permission from the principal of the school as well as the teachers before proceeding with my interviews and observations. Written permission was also obtained for all the students I observed. I conducted my observations during school hours so as not to interfere with the normal routine of the teacher and students. Interviews with teachers took place during lunch hours and after school. All subjects were assured that their participation in this study was voluntary and that all information remains confidential. Names or other identifying factors were not be used in the summary report.

Data Gathering Strategies

The majority of the data was collected through rehearsal observations of the students. Informal observations occurred over a series of rehearsals. I wrote field notes during each observation to accurately record students' actions and engagement levels throughout the rehearsal being observed. The purpose of the observations and interviews was to collect as much information as

possible about the change, if any, in student engagement while students were involved in the school play.

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Site, Individuals, and Data

The data from this research was collected from the researcher's school, The Presentation School. The Presentation School is located in the town of Sonoma. It is a private school with a 168 students, primarily from a middle- upper-class background. The students are primarily Caucasian, with a small minority of various ethnic backgrounds. The curriculum is academically challenging and offers an array of enrichment opportunities. The school has done one musical a year for the last five years with the help of a teacher and parent volunteers. Then entire student body participates in the play, although middle school students are given the opportunity to audition to play lead roles. The leading characters in the play rehearse after school three days a week, for two months, to prepare for the production.

In the beginning of January auditions were held for the spring musical of Peter Pan. Students were required to sing a short song and read scenes from the script. In order to audition a student had to turn in a permission slip, signed by their teacher and parent committing them to the after-school rehearsals, the memorizing of lines, and the intention of maintaining good academic standings in their classes. Once the show was cast, a rehearsal schedule was created where most of the lead roles were required to come two days a week to two-hour rehearsals after school.

The first few weeks of rehearsals students worked on their characters and their line memorization. Music rehearsals were scheduled simultaneously for the actors to learn their harmonies and vocal parts. By the fifth week of rehearsals blocking of the scenes began.

Students were required to learn the technical theater terms for stage blocking and write them in their scripts.

By week seven, all students in the play were required to be off book (have their lines completely memorized) and well aware of their character's blocking for the scenes. Students whose characters were in dance numbers had extra rehearsals added at this point and time.

Week eight was the "tech" week, in which technical elements such as lights, sound, and special effects were added to the production. Rehearsals this week ran four hours a night. All cast members were expected to attend.

The week of the show students were required to come with their personally made costumes for three dress rehearsals, a student performance, and two public performances. The Saturday after the shows, students were required to come help "strike" (break down) the set and pack up the costumes and props.

Observations

The play consisted of thirty-two sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. Five were boys, the rest were girls. One eighth grade boy, Brian (pseudonym) was cast as the lead role of Captain Hook. Brian has had trouble in school in his academics and behavior in the past. He had to receive special permission from the eighth grade teacher and the principal to accept the role in the play. Brian is a shy boy who had never been in a play before. He was attracted to the role but nervous about performing in front of his peers. As soon as he was cast, Brian showed a great commitment outside of his normal character to the play and his part. He was on time to rehearsals, focused during his scenes and promptly learned all his lines. Brian grew a new found enthusiasm for theater which improved his overall attitude. His teacher noted that he was more "alert in class" and "friendlier to his classmates" during his time in the play. Brian's parents,

who are divorced, volunteered to help with the show making costumes and building sets. This was the first time they have volunteered to help at the school in many years.

The role of Wendy was played by Valerie (pseudonym) an eighth grader with high academic standing and on student council. She had never been in a play before and was known throughout the school as being dreadfully shy. She, like Brian, took the role very seriously and fully committed to breaking through her insecurities to the point of singing a solo song to her peers on stage. Valerie is going to high school in the fall and has signed up for a theater arts workshop at her new high school this summer.

Peter was played by Audra (pseudonym) a seventh grader who is an avid athlete and currently participates in many community productions. She was elated when she found out she earned the role of Peter Pan and brought great professionalism and experience to the school production. Audra will most likely audition for the play next year.

Interviews

I interviewed my fellow colleagues, the seventh and eighth grade teachers, about their perception of the impact the play had on their students. Their students participated in the play from the auditions to the performances and they witnessed their behavior in the classroom during the course of the show.

When I interviewed both of these teachers on the impact the play had on their students they both overwhelmingly had positive things to report. One teacher said, “The students were so excited and full of energy every day that it was contagious. There was a buzz amongst the whole classroom for the production.”

The three above-mentioned students did not show any negative effect on their academic work. In fact, both Valerie and Audra turned in work early to be able to accommodate both

commitments. As for Brian, his teacher said that he was much more engaged throughout the day and seemed to develop new friends within the classroom. “Brian seemed so happy. It was nice to see him have a smile on his face around school.”

One teacher commented on the fact that the entire school was involved with the production and how rare it is for the school to have school-wide collaborative project to be proud of. The teachers said that not only is the production a great artistic outlet but it engaged the students that are not normally as interested in school activities.

I interviewed the principal of the school briefly after the last performance. She couldn’t believe how engaged and well behaved the middle school students were. “I often have to step in to discipline backstage during these spring musical productions, but this year, I really saw an improvement overall in engagement and behavior,” she said.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

Overall, my observations during the course of the play show that theater arts program at school increased motivation and excitement. Providing the students an outlet outside of the classroom to work with their peers, explore their artistic side and collaborate on a big project increased enthusiasm towards school.

Through my interviews I learned that the energy and enthusiasm gained from the play transferred into the classroom as well. Students were very excited to be at school but still motivated to do well academically. The principal commented on the good behavior of the students and their professionalism that had yet to be seen in the other activities offered at the school.

Not only was the play a wonderful experience for the students involved but it brought together our school community. New parents volunteered, teachers worked with different grade levels, and our school opened its doors to the local community to share in this project.

Although this case study did not provide me the scientific evidence of cognitive development in my students it is my firm belief, through the research I have done, and my own experiences, that a student's involvement in theater arts over the course of time, would indeed show academic improvement, i.e., higher test scores.

Limitations/Gaps in the Research

There were some limitations to this action research project. One limitation would be my sample group. I used the students at my own school, which is a private school. There is not a wide

variety of diversity and most of the students are involved in many extracurricular activities. Most students at the school perform at a higher level when compared in public schools.

Another limitation is The Presentation School has a spring musical budgeted, and we were able to obtain many parent volunteers. Producing the play with the money and support provided is much easier at my school than a public school without such resources. The Presentation School is already equipped with a theater facility, including lighting and sound equipment. A limitation on my data collecting was that I was not able to administer any sort of standardized test to try and prove my hypothesis.

Implications for Future Research

This study provides many implications for future research. It would be helpful to set up a similar program at a public school in a more diverse setting. It would also be necessary in the future to examine the impact of theater arts programs focusing on the lower grades to be able to track this program over time. It would be interesting to set up a sample class where standardized tests were given pre- and post-productions over the period of several years. It would also be worthwhile to interview students after they've been involved in how these programs affected their academic decisions throughout their school careers.

Overall Significance of the Research

Overall, this study supports the need for theater arts in elementary schools. Not only is theater arts a current California content standard, therefore, deemed a necessity by the government as part of a well-rounded education, but the experiences it offers a student are unique, creative, and life-changing. From first hand, personal experience I was able to take part in and witness the transformation being a part of a play has on a student. I saw a student who was not enthusiastic

about school find an outlet of enjoyment that was challenging that he didn't know existed. Stemming back from John Dewey I have examined that art is part of daily life and something that our students should experience. Drama can teach students emotion, empathy, apathy, comprehensive understanding, cognition, increased language vocabulary, and motivation. "Theater education is a tool for the study of history, culture, diversity, and the human experience as a whole," (C.E.T.A., 2008).

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