Arts Education and Creativity

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Arts-based disciplines in the schools and the creative thought those classes generate are recognized in the areas of research and education. But arts education courses in our schools are being threatened with extinction. Do adolescent students see the arts-based classes offered at their schools as important to their creativity? This study explores the question "Does arts education have a relationship to eighth-grade rural adolescent students' creativity?" Student questionnaires, focus-group interviews, and follow-up interviews were data collection methods used with 92 eighth-grade teen students. Strong emphasis was placed on gathering personal narratives, comments, and opinions directly from the students. Content analysis was used to analyze the student interviews. The students in this study had much to share on the arts courses offered in their school.

Arts Education and Creativity
The topic of this article is arts education and creativity. The study from which this article originated focused on the relationship of arts education to personal motivation, self-efficacy, and creativity in adolescent students in rural schools. The research on arts education is ever growing. The main focus at this time appears to be the continuous debate of whether the arts can affect student achievement (See Baum, Owen, & Oreck, 1997; Burton, Horowitz & Abeles, 2000; Catteral, 2002a; Luftig, 2000; Winner & Cooper, 2000). In other words these researchers continue to argue as to whether the arts can help student learning through academic transfer in the core curricula such as language arts, math, science, and social studies. Moving more toward the focus of this study, a growing body of research investigates the relationship that arts education might have with student’s self-esteem, motivation, self-
efficacy, and creativity (See Betts, Fisher, & Hicks, 1995; Deasy, 2003; Emery, 1989; Hughes & Wilson, 2004; Jensen, 2001; Ramey, 2005).

Methodology

For this study the qualitative methodology of narrative inquiry was chosen to gain data from the adolescent students. Open-ended questionnaires, focus-group interviews as well as follow-up one-on-one interviews were used to obtain the information needed. For this particular study narrative inquiry was the sensible method to gain information for this research. It has the ability to clarify the meaning of events (Lareau & Shultz, 1996). I wanted to delve into the importance of arts education and its possible impact on eighth grade student’s creativity. It was essential to incorporate the unscripted and unrehearsed speech of the individuals that were the focus for this study. I also felt an obligation to those who are underrepresented in the rural public schools of the United States by sharing their voices and perspectives, previously left out of so many studies (Marshall, 1985).

The final study that I wished to present would not have been as rich or detailed without the use of qualitative methods. Open-ended questionnaires and interviews provided the opportunity to truly delve into the thoughts and viewpoints of the participants, analyze their statements, and present their input into the realm of research and academia. This study would not be the one that I envision without the use of qualitative approach.

Approximately 200 eighth grade students enrolled in two separate rural middle schools had the opportunity to participate in this study. Eighth grade students were involved, because they had the most experience with the arts-based classes offered in the middle schools where the research study was conducted. By the conclusion of the study 92 students, 34 males and 58 females, had chosen to participate. From the 92 student questionnaire responses 40 students overall, 20 from each school, were chosen for focus-group interviews. Each focus-group consisted of four students and there were five focus-groups at each school.

To say that there is no bias on my part is an untruth. I am a strong believer in the importance of the arts in schools. I feel that the arts disciplines can have a positive effect on student creativity. Though I have a bias on this topic, I diligently pursued pure, unbiased research for this study. The words of the students are presented in a true, unscripted format. Very little editing has been done to their words. Some grammatical corrections have been made and repetitions, large pauses, and miscellaneous sounds have been left out for narrative clarity. I was interested in speaking to students who had taken arts-based courses during their time in a rural middle school. I was searching for student perspectives, whether
positive or negative. I wanted to share their words. These students were able to share the potential effect that their arts-based classes might have on their creativity.

The Students

Creativity will be defined in this study as the imaginative thought used or formed through arts-based courses offered in a school. The term imagination will also be used in this section as a term for creativity. Educators can offer learning environments to students that will increase their creativity and imagination. When young people are involved in creative activities there is a good chance that they will be less likely to take part in more destructive or unhealthy behaviors (Gasman & Anderson-Thompkins, 2003; Vicario & Chambliss, 2001). The arts can offer those creative learning opportunities. When young people are allowed to express their imagination and creativity they can break through ideas and thoughts that might have been fixed or static. They can see past what is considered normal or average and create something new. For a little while in that classroom, students’ minds can be free (Goldberg, 1997; Greene, 2007). In our focus-group interviews Jasmine, Burt, Ginny, and Mary spoke on how they found that freedom in their arts classes:

Jasmine: Band showed me that music, art, and anything in life is more than just doing what is right in front of you. That there’s more to everything. You make the exact note highly depressing or bright and cheery.

Burt: Art helped me to grow as an artist and think differently. One day we had to sketch a tree and then the next day we actually went outside and re-drew it. It made me look at the tree differently.

Ginny: I think the arts classes let you be unique and let you be who you really want to be right then and like in math you have to do what everybody else is doing it’s just numbers, but in the arts you can do whatever.

Mary: From sixth to eighth grade I have always liked drama and art. Every year I love that I do something new in those classes. I feel that taking these classes for three years have given me lots of creativity.
Chance also talked about his creativity and how his arts classes might have an effect when he stated, “I wasn’t very creative to begin with, but band has widened my mind so I can think about different things.” Kitty continued with this same thought when she said, “All of the arts classes that I’ve taken have helped me be more creative. They make think more and in different ways.”

Many students associated their creativity with what they love to do. Students felt more willing to create and express in a class that they enjoyed and looked forward to attending. Being able to take pleasure in a task or assignment is a highly desired goal in young people. Enjoying a topic or subject takes time, but the journey through the process can be one of creative expression and personal success. Working through a creative process means that the student may fail, succeed, collaborate, and think, but one thing it will never be is boring. Being creative is exciting (Weinstein, 2007). Three students named Lashay, Annalesh, and Scott had the following to say about the joy that they experienced while being creative in their arts electives:

Lashay: Arts classes helped me to improve myself in what I love doing. I know how to draw, sing, and act better than I used to. Now I am better at it and would love to make a job out of it.

Annalesh: I now have opened my eyes to all possibilities. I love to act, draw, and sing. I love to write songs and sing them. My drawing has improved I no longer just draw the same darn thing every single day.

Scott: In drama they show you change in the world of how it used to be. They put you where you pretend to be a character from the sixteenth or eighteenth century still and you can tell that their lives were a lot different from ours. No matter what they were. You’re just a whole different person in a whole different world and they put you into that and it’s just so much fun. Because you’re not just reading a textbook the whole time. You can express yourself openly and express someone from the past.

These students had educators who kindled their creativity and imagination (Duffy, 2006). Their teachers wanted them to think past the normal daily routine and branch out. These eighth graders were given a chance to look past the four walls in the classroom and think outside of that box.
Ron, Carrie, Eric, and Melissa share their experiences:

Ron: In the arts classes, the teachers have shown me to move out of the box and be more unique compared to the others. Before, I just did my thing like everyone else. Now I am different and that’s a good thing for me.

Carrie: The arts classes have shown that no matter what people think of what you are doing it’s how unique it is. In paintings you can do something that is beyond the average thing. To think outside the box is what some teachers have said. When I go home and am bored then I want to do or make something very unique.

Eric: I was a lot different when I was in the sixth grade especially from how I am now. I dressed in my little preppy clothes. I wouldn’t do much outside of the box. Now I have more creativity. I have more arts in my life and that makes me feel more like myself, more confident.

Melissa: The arts open doors for new ideas whether it’s writing music, writing a play, writing songs, or making the next “Scream” painting. It really helps me think more outside the box. But I know some kids who just stress and stay further in the box than ever.

Life is full of chances to be creative (Goldberg, 1997). Each person has to decide whether they want to take advantage of those creative opportunities. These students have taken the step to be creative and have enjoyed the courses taken up to this point. Arts classes can take hold of young people’s excitement. The arts can engage. They give students chances to be creative, imaginative, confident, and secure (Smith, 2001). Alex and Dora had the following to say about their freedom to be creative and expressive:

Alex: In our arts classes you can try new things and not really be told what you can and can’t do because in art you need to express yourself in your own way. Which helps creativity in most students.
Dora: Whenever you have to draw something. When you have to come up with something on your own to draw instead of the teacher giving you something to draw. That makes you push your creativity.

Christina spoke about how her creativity in band class helped her share with her younger sister at home:

Band helped me write songs better. For example, my little sister wants to be in band so I write little songs and help her learn notes and stuff. Being in band, I can write out the notes because I see them every day.

Polly spoke about how her art class helped her express herself creatively when she said, “Art is the best because I like drawing and painting, especially painting, and making stuff with other stuff. You can just express yourself through a drawing.” Mike had a similar statement when he spoke on his art class, he stated, “In art if you think of something you just draw it or write it down and draw it, whatever you want to do.” T.L wavered a bit on his creativity in arts class when he told me, “I don’t think that I’m the most creative person in the world, but I do believe that being in arts classes helps my creativity.” Shane, on the other hand, was very confident in his creativity and imagination. He stated, “It has helped me to be more concentrated and confident. I am more creative because of art classes, so I do better in school.” The arts can educate young people for uncertainty. Situations in life are rarely permanent and it is advantageous for students to know that it is okay to be unsure. Imagination and creativity don’t come from the already answered questions. They come from the undiscovered responses and ideas (Dupuis, 2004, Eisner, 2002; Heath & Robinson, 2004). The arts can give students a chance to generate their own thoughts and explore their own options and creative paths.

Though many students felt that the arts courses engaged their creativity and imagination there were some who did not. Holly and Kimm had the following to say about their band class and creativity. Holly stated that there was, “No creativity, we play the music as written,” while Kimm made the following comment:

Kimm: Band and art haven’t really affected my creativity because they weren’t really classes where you could express your creativity because you had to do the work the way the teacher wanted it done.
Some arts-based classes don’t lend themselves to creativity and expression as often as others. There can be many opportunities for creative expression if students wish to pursue and educators offer them. The arts have the foundation to engage creativity and imagination. Sadly these young ladies did not find it in these particular courses. Hopefully other prospects can be found in some of their other classes offered at the middle school, or at the future, high school level.

**Conclusion**

As a researcher there is bias on my part. I do feel that arts education has a relationship to student creativity. It is hard to be objective when one feels so connected to the research being pursued but I believe that it is my history and interest in the subject that makes for a stronger study. This study would not be the one that it is without a background in theater, dance, music, and education. Without my past experiences in the arts this research would not be the piece that I would like it to be nor would I be the educational researcher that I strive to be (Wilson, 1994).

Arts education in the schools has a place and a need. Students enjoy their arts-based courses, the participants in this study are proof of that fact, but even outside that pleasure the arts are significant. Students expressed an increase in creativity. These are strong traits that should be nurtured in any classroom.

**References**


