



Arts Education in Maryland Schools Alliance

Making the Case for Arts and Cultural Policy and Programs for Young Children

Key arguments supporting the vital importance of arts education are outlined in this paper written by Arts Education in Maryland Schools (AEMS) Alliance Trustee Mary Ann Mears for an international conference, *The art of rights, the right to art: an exploration of the arts and culture in young children's lives*, held in Cartagena, Colombia September 2009

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Introduction:

Making a compelling case for arts programs for young children with special focus on those who live amidst challenging situations is linked to advocacy efforts for arts education and for public support of the arts overall. If one believes that the arts are fundamental to our humanity and that they are in large part what define us as a species, then there is a moral imperative to enable all citizens of the world to access them. And given what we understand about human growth and development, that imperative is all the more critical for children during the years of their most intense cognitive, social, and emotional development. The arts are fundamental sustenance.

To understand how to do this case-making most effectively, it is important to consider an overview of the range of arguments that can be made, the broad cultural and intellectual context for policy decision-making as well as the political and theoretical context within the education field, and then to analyze intersections in order to understand opportunities, leverage points, and strategies.

Overview of policy arguments for arts as a vital part of young peoples' lives:

Arguments for providing arts education through public education or other public means for young children fall into several categories. The most basic argument is simply that the arts are part of a complete education of the whole child. A related view posits that they are essential given a philosophy of education embracing equity and the value of the individual's capacity for self-expression and self-actualization. The arts aid self-discovery and development of a sense of efficacy and, concomitantly, greater appreciation of one's fellows, thus promoting tolerance and respect. Further the arts develop cultural literacy, which enhances our ability to live in community. Often these arguments intersect with placing a high value on democratic processes and systems of government and the capacity of the citizenry to fully participate.

Another position is that unless arts education is widely available societies will fail to reap the benefits of the genius within—the tragedy of a Mozart who goes undiscovered. The arts may be prized for the unique intellectual capacities they foster. Another perspective is that our economies will benefit from a workforce trained in the arts with the capacities the arts foster—creativity and innovation, ability to collaborate, to communicate effectively and to be resourceful. A key characteristic of the arts is that they are excellent modes to experience and understand process as opposed to looking for the single answer to a given question and regurgitating it. Whether experiencing art, but most especially in

creating it, one learns about process—making a set of predictions, actualizing them, being confounded perhaps, and finding needed adjustments or even reversals as one works through discovery to final results which are often delightful in revealing a series of learnings and persistent overcoming of challenges. The arts at their best are hard work and great fun or as has been said they are “hard fun” as cited by Richard J. Deasy in the advocacy film entitled “Hard Fun.”¹ Deasy says that the phrase was first used in describing arts activities by Seymour Papert, a cognitive scientist at MIT and one of the early leaders in Artificial Intelligence. The nimble thinking and resiliency nurtured through the arts have important application to life’s challenges.

Finally, one of the most important aspects of the arts is that they engage and nurture the imagination. The imagination is our most powerful tool and it is the essential capacity that enables us to aspire. To aspire to achieve, to aspire to enjoy life and share its meaning with fellow human beings is a capacity to which every child is entitled.

Cultural and Intellectual Context:

There are certain contextual intersections with current trends and areas of public interest that bear noting. While what follows is drawn from US publications and media, the ideas resonate and have sources beyond.

Understanding the relationship of brain function and learning and the implications:

There seems to be great interest in the human mind/brain, stimulated perhaps by the new and growing capacity to peer inside it. Emerging research is impacting thinking about education. What is being revealed is that the brain is complex and messy and we aren’t the highly rational creatures that some of us pretend to be. Hierarchies in intellectual endeavor are being challenged. Our decision making processes are not purely linear; they are much more complex. Further, our memories play tricks and our emotions govern us more than we might think.

Economists Daniel Pink (*A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future*)² and Thomas Friedman (*The World is Flat*)³ have highlighted the importance of the right side of the brain and creativity for our individual and collective competitiveness in the global economy. Strong and recurring criticism of the Federal *No Child Left Behind* policy is that it has led to the “stifling of the imagination” and narrowing of the curriculum to the exclusion of the arts. Arts education attains new significance in these contexts.

In another context, there has been recent attention to the role of emotional intelligence. Drake Bennett’s article in the *Boston Globe* (4/5/09)⁴ discusses efforts to promote student learning about emotions. All of the arts address emotions—whether drawing on them for more compelling forms of self-expression and communication or analyzing them in the context of experiencing works of art. Work with young people in theatre has been studied in terms of its

effects on tolerance and enhanced understanding of and communication with others (*Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*, Richard J. Deasy, editor, Arts Education Partnership)⁵. Are there opportunities to learn more about how learning in the arts enhances emotional intelligence?

Executive function -- the ability to think clearly, focus, and self-regulate -- in young children is a capacity that is currently of considerable interest among researchers and the public. Use of the arts and imaginary play are recognized as key strategies in developing executive function. The September 27th issue of the *New York Times Magazine* included an article by Paul Tough, *The Make-Believe Solution: Can imaginary play teach children to control their impulses—and be better students?*⁶ The article highlighted The Tools of the Mind program in Red Bank, New Jersey, which is based on research by Deborah Leong and Elena Bodrova.

An area that is receiving a considerable amount of attention currently is the malleability of IQ, particularly of low SES (socio-economic status) populations. (Richard Nisbett's book, *Intelligence and How to Get It*).⁷ Research might look at the impacts of arts learning on raising IQ among low SES students. However, what is most important for arts education is the whole notion of malleability. Beyond IQ, what are the ways in which capacity of students in the arts disciplines can be enhanced? Ironically the idea of talent in the arts as innate has created enormous barriers for equity in arts education. To demonstrate malleability in arts capacities would be helpful for practice as well as supporting advocacy around equity, which is by far the most important policy issue in arts education. Malcolm Gladwell's book about outliers⁸ also raises questions about equity of opportunity for achievement in our society, which are relevant to arts education.

In a piece published in the *New York Times* on August 16, 2009, Alison Gopnik, Professor of Psychology at Berkeley,⁹ wrote:

The young brain is remarkably plastic and flexible...Baby brains have many more neural connections than adult brains. But they are much less efficient. Over time we prune away the connections that don't work....

In fact our mature brain seems to be programmed by our childhood experiences....Very young children imagine and explore a vast array of possibilities. As they grow older and absorb more evidence, certain possibilities become much more likely and more useful. They then make decisions based on this selective information and become increasingly reluctant to give those ideas up and try something new. Computer scientists talk about the difference between exploring and exploiting—a system will learn more if it explores many possibilities, but it will be more effective if it acts on the most likely one. Babies explore; adults exploit.

It might be valuable to consider these contexts and trends in thinking about the brain and education as opportunities to examine their interplay with the arts.

The report: *Young Children and the Arts: Making Creative Connections, A Report of the Task Force on Children's Learning and the Arts: Birth to Age Eight*¹⁰ offers thoughtful insight from neuroscience focused on young children:

Recent neuroscientific research on the infant brain has provided reinforcement for what psychologists have long believed: that experience in the first three years of life has a powerful influence on life-long development and learning.

As a result of new technologies that permit us to see into the brain, we now know that early experience not only has a psychological impact on development, it also has a physical impact on the neural pathways that allow a child to understand and process information effectively and manage emotion...

The arts rely on a constellation of intellectual, emotional intellectual and social skills, which develop at varied paces among disparate children. Concomitantly, the arts are ideal just because they engage so many skills and dispositions to foster development of the child. It has been well documented through correlational studies that the arts have the capacity to engage children and to build the ability to pay attention and to motivate them. (*How Arts Training Influences Cognition*, Michael Posner, Ph.D. et. al., *Learning, Arts, and the Brain: the Dana Consortium Report on Arts and Cognition*, Dana Foundation).¹¹ Another study in the Dana Report, by Elizabeth Spelke, *Effects of Music Instruction on Developing Cognitive Systems at the Foundations of Math and Science*,¹² found correlational evidence of the impact of extensive music instruction on the development of spatial reasoning. Neuroscientific research in this arena is quite nascent, methodologies are being refined and intriguing possibilities discovered. Broad neuroscientific research also addresses neuroplasticity, happily finding that adults have more of it than previously thought but most important in this context, the degree to which circuitry in young children is being reinforced or lost. There are windows of opportunity, which are open in young children but close as they age. This means that if one believes that every child should be given the opportunity to reach full potential, they should have access to arts education at an early age.

Specific to music, in his book, *This is Your Brain on Music*, Daniel J. Levitin¹³ explores the complexity of brain activity associated with music and writes:

...other research has revealed long-term effects of musical activity. Music listening enhances or changes certain neural circuits, including the density of dendritic connections in the primary auditory cortex. The Harvard neuroscientist, Gottfried Schlaug has shown that the front portion of the corpus callosum—the mass of fibers connecting the two cerebral hemispheres—is significantly larger in musicians than non-musicians, and particularly for musicians who began their training early. This reinforces the notion that musical operations become bilateral with increased training, as musicians coordinate and recruit neural structures in both the left and right hemispheres.

While extension of these neural benefits beyond music itself—“far transfer”—are accepted among neuroscientists as correlational at this point, studies are being designed to explore causality.

Educators are following the research and dialogue is being actively fostered between the research community and the education field. In May of 2009, the Johns Hopkins University Neuro-Education Initiative¹⁴ sponsored the Learning Arts and the Brain Summit to bring together researchers and education practitioners with the intent of informing practice and shaping a research agenda.

The benefits of the arts as an essential element in education and of importance to broader societal goals is manifest to many and increasingly supported by research. Further, as practice in arts education is shaped by increasingly sophisticated research by educators, psychologists and neuroscientists, the positive outcomes for children are growing.

For many years, (ever since I got a computer) I have talked metaphorically about learning and the arts by saying that we are hard wired for the arts and citing cultural/historical evidence for that. Now I am starting to add that neuroscience is on its way to giving us insights into how that works – that will help us better serve students.

Public Awareness of the Value of Arts Education:

Awareness is expanding among voters as revealed by Celinda Lake’s research (the report by Lake Research Partners may be accessed at www.theimagination.net).¹⁵ Voters across demographic sectors believe education should be cultivating the creative potential of the country, specifically the imagination, and they believe in impressive percentages that the arts are the only way to do this. Parents and communities with the capacity for policy influence are demanding higher quality arts programs for their children

Education Policy and Theoretical Context:

Focus on Basic Skills:

There is a very strong focus in American education on basic skills – in one form or another this has been the case for decades. Currently, high-stakes accountability has heightened the consequences whether intended or unintended. A challenge in America is that while political attention is focused on addressing the educational needs of all children through *No Child Left Behind*, more often than not, underprivileged children’s access to high quality arts programs are being diminished as test driven learning strategies narrowly focused on reading and math are increasingly applied to this population. The implications for arts education are complex. To the extent that the arts are seen as supporting basic skills they may be valued more. This raises controversy in some settings.

Those in the field of arts education focus on the more intrinsic values of the arts while those whose purview is broader may be looking for a range of extrinsic benefits. It is a false dichotomy to exclude one or the other, as the value for the child is not as great if either perspective governs exclusively.

Multiple Intelligences:

Much has been written about Howard Gardener's theory of multiple intelligences,¹⁶ which reflects the varying ways human brains are wired for receiving and processing information. Often the focus is on determining students' strengths to be sure that teachers are optimizing individual instruction. Equally there is the opportunity to recognize that there are multiple pathways that can be honed in every child. Thus, the child who may be strongest as a visual learner can also benefit from experiences that enhance their kinesthetic learning capacity. Brain research indicates that reinforcing learning through utilizing multiple pathways leads to enhanced understanding and retention.

In addition to multiple intelligences, there are different ways of thinking. Again brain research adds insight. In simple terms, the left brain function tracks reasoning in a more linear way while right brain function is characterized as non-linear with intuitive leaps and more complex comprehension of relationships incorporating emotional and sensory factors in judgment and response.

Students may have a proclivity towards a particular way of thinking, but enhancing their ability to function in more than one modality will yield significant advantages.

Literacy:

Related to individual student's cognitive modes, is the concept of literacy. Typically understood as verbal, literacy encompasses one's ability to understand, manipulate and communicate through symbol systems. Verbal literacy (oral and written) is an essential goal in education both for its own sake – so that students can understand and be understood in many contexts – and it is vital for enabling students to access content in many disciplines.

It is important to recognize that there are other types of literacy such as visual, kinesthetic, numeric, and musical literacy. Clearly these are related to multiple intelligences and are determined by the way our brains work. They are also determined culturally. Further, cultivation of these forms of literacy is essential for full participation in one's culture.

Thus, in setting goals for literacy, all forms of literacy need to be addressed. To give an example, visual drawing whether representational or diagrammatic defines relationships which may be spatial, narrative, or symbolic. It is an ideal way to master understanding of the physical realm, organize information and communicate certain kinds of ideas.

Development of different kinds of literacy can be mutually reinforcing. A UCLA study showed that when students were given a prompt and asked to draw a

response before writing, their written work was more organized, detailed and better written. Very young children will say that they are going to “write a picture” or “draw a story.” Research has also demonstrated the link between learning in music and spatial temporal reasoning.

Good instruction in these disciplines has always integrated literacy whether verbal, numeric, visual or other. It is time to renew the rigor of literacy in all core subjects. The particularly synergistic aspect of arts integration (integrating the arts across the curriculum) is that it will enhance student engagement by emphasizing the connection of skills to content, which will appeal to students’ curiosity.

Skills and Content:

An ongoing tension in education derives from the false dichotomy between skills and content. This dichotomy has been fostered to some degree by centralization of accountability and standards setting. It is not surprising in an era of globalization for there to be a drive to establish universal standards. At the same time, the sweep of skills and knowledge is expanding rapidly. The challenge is to grasp the depth and breadth across multiple fields and not sacrifice their integrity. Skills are cross cutting so it is tempting to focus on skills while leaving content to local decision making, even to the individual teacher. The difficulty in this is that content is devalued even if unintentionally. The economics and politics of standardized testing greatly exacerbate this problem narrowing the curriculum and seriously limiting intellectual aspirations. Arts integration is a key strategy in addressing the issue of balancing skills and content. However, to be effective arts integration must be done well; instruction in the arts disciplines themselves must be present and robust.

Further, providing a breadth of activities and content through arts instruction and arts integration is helpful in addressing students’ social interactions. It builds their capacity for self expression in a variety of modes and offers the opportunity for expanding their empathy and understanding for others while deepening their insight into their own developing personalities. The arts thus support a healthy school environment for learning.

In terms of the shape and texture of the child’s day, a critical factor is the extent to which a rich breadth of experiences can be offered. Learning in and through the arts afford very effective means to do this and, thus, to enhance children’s acquisition of skills and content.

21st Century Skills

A major influence on education policy today in the US emerged from the business community and is captured in the 21st Century Skills Framework. There are a number of articulations; one of the clearest was presented by Richard J. Deasy in March 2009 at the Deans Roundtable at University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC)¹⁷:

Critical Thinking & Problem Solving--Research, Analysis, Synthesis, Project Management

Creativity & Innovation--New Knowledge Creation, "Best Fit," Design Solutions, Artful Storytelling

Collaboration, Teamwork & Leadership--Cooperation, Compromise, Consensus, Community-building

Cross-cultural Understanding--Across Diverse Ethnic, Knowledge & Organizational Cultures

Communication & Media Fluency--Crafting and Analyzing Messages & Using Media Effectively

Career & Learning Self-reliance--Managing Change, Lifelong Learning, & Career Redefinition

Computing & ICT Fluency--Effective Use of Electronic Information & Knowledge Tools

It is evident that these are skills that the arts are uniquely positioned to afford.

In analyzing barriers and opportunities in our country, 21st century skills are a great opportunity. While economic conditions are a barrier in terms of scarcity of funds for education, discussions on equipping students with the skills and dispositions the arts provide are particularly effective now in case making given the priorities identified in 21st century skills for competitiveness in the global economy.

Metrics and Accountability:

Another challenge is metrics applied to accountability; often what can be measured easily assumes exaggerated status. The arts have been reduced in many cases by educators who are terrified of the consequences of having low scores on high stakes standardized tests. This was documented by the Council for Basic Education after the implementation of *No Child Left Behind*; principals who were surveyed in five states attributed cutbacks in arts programs on their own part or by peers to *No Child Left Behind*.

In advocacy one finds that a public official with broad responsibility for the public's interest is likely to be very attentive to metrics/data as supporting decision-making. That is certainly the case in the US today. Our governor in Maryland uses a system of metrics called "State Stat" across all departments. It is considered a model that other states are emulating. The new US Secretary of Education is heightening the focus on metrics at the federal level. He does recognize the importance of arts education but it is clear in the shape of the new *Race to the Top* (www.ed.gov)¹⁸ initiative that accountability is the single most important factor. Through this initiative, State governments are being incentivized by the US Department of Education to develop longitudinal data

systems that track the individual student's progress throughout their school career.

The challenge is to find meaningful measures that will support the values of the arts while substantively evaluating the effectiveness of programs. Simply put – one must make the case that the arts are vital and that practitioners are providing effective instruction so that children are actually deriving the benefits that are so vital.

If arts teachers balk at assessing the effectiveness of their work with students, they risk being considered irrelevant. However if they find ways to measure and improve their work based on the most important facets of the arts and preserving the integrity of the arts disciplines, they can strengthen their work with children while providing those responsible for making fiscal decisions with justification for supporting arts education. Arts educators who accept and even embrace accountability will be in a stronger position to make the case for their programs. They can demonstrate that the instruction they are providing is effective and, indeed, use assessments as feedback to improve their teaching and a way to make children's learning in the arts transparent to parents and the students themselves. In a sense we in the arts can do this better than anyone. What is critical is to use the best and most meaningful methods. We in the arts invented portfolio assessment, which is increasingly recognized as the most authentic and complete way to measure student learning. At the same time we need to recognize that there are valuable facets of arts learning and experience which do not lend themselves to assessment and must be preserved for the benefit of our children and communities.

Related to this, in Maryland we are seeing a great opportunity in using technology to make portfolio assessment feasible in a way that was not possible before. As portfolio assessment can encompass all other assessments and is the most sophisticated and best honors the deepest values and traditions of the arts, this is a tremendous opportunity.

Equity:

In the United States and other parts of the world, the major issue in access to arts education programs is equity. Well-to-do parents know that the arts are vital to their children's success in life. Some understand the intellectual, psychological and social benefits of participating in arts programs; for others it is a matter of class acceptance and social upward mobility. In any case, they demand these programs. The equity issue arises in public education within poor communities. Education policy is developed and implemented at several levels. Ironically those who are most powerful in the macro context are furthest from the child and often not particularly engaged in the content of the arts professionally or even personally.

Decision makers are layered in terms of their impact on child ranging from teachers and parents to principals, district leaders, to state and federal government. Largely because of funding mechanisms, the most critical decisions

are often made at a distance from the children. In many cases policy makers may seek the benefits of robust arts education programs for their own children while accepting something far more restricted for the general public. There are many policy makers whose position is: first, let the children learn to read and compute and then, after that's accomplished, address whether or not they are culturally literate. The patent absurdity is that the child does not come back and repeat second grade after the educators figure out how to teach them to read which may or may not even happen. That the window of opportunity for the individual child is lost does not factor into the larger policy discussion.

In considering the perspective of the public leaders who have a double standard (what they require for their own children and what they will support for the general public --“a good hamburger rather than filet mignon”-- as a state school board member phrased it for me over 20 years ago) it often leads us to utilitarian arguments such as, that in order to provide a “good hamburger” it helps to have the arts as they motivate children to come to school to eat the hamburger! Of course, it is critical to lead the discussion beyond the utilitarian. As advocates it is useful to draw on a broad array of strategies given the range of policy makers we must reach and their fundamental beliefs about preparing children for life in the larger society.

Advocacy:

Framing thoughtful arguments, which address contextual factors, are based on solid research and best practices, and consider the roles and interests of any given decision maker is the mission of advocacy.

The range of arguments can be controversial; some very dedicated arts proponents passionately disavow extrinsic values such as the economic benefits of preparing the workforce to be more competitive in the creative economy or the arts supporting learning in other subject areas or the arts as therapeutic for students with emotional difficulties or even the role of the arts in socialization.

I believe these are false dichotomies. As an artist, I have a much more holistic view. Everything I do is part and parcel of my being an artist. Art is germane to the most practical aspects of my life as well as the emotional and spiritual. Of course.

Threaded throughout this piece are statements about the purposes and value of arts education. A thoughtful list was developed recently entitled *Seven Broad Purposes of Arts Education* (from *The Qualities of Quality: Understanding Excellence in Arts Education*, Steve Seidel, Shari Tishman, Ellen Winner, Lois Hetland, Patricia Palmer, Project Zero, Harvard University)¹⁹

1. *Arts education should foster broad dispositions and skills, especially the capacity to think creatively and the capacity to make connections.*

2. *Arts education should teach artistic skills and techniques...*
3. *Arts education should develop esthetic awareness.*
4. *Arts practices should provide ways of understanding the world.*
5. *Arts education should provide a way for students to engage with community, civic and social issues.*
6. *Arts education should provide a venue for students to express themselves.*
7. *Arts education should help students develop as individuals.*

This list reflects the beliefs of a group of researchers and practitioners in the field of arts education. In making the case for arts education, there are many purposes and/or values that can be cited. In considering the target for persuasion it is critical to understand the way that they think and what their priorities are. It is essential as well to consider the broad contexts, which shift rapidly in calibrating case making.

My thinking on advocacy is based on experiences that colleagues and I have had as we have spoken with decision makers including school boards, superintendents, principals, legislators, mayors, and governors about the arts and education policy. The most important asset we can ever have is credibility. In the US education decision-makers rely heavily on data and research. So it is important for us to use education research but we are very careful not to overstate what it reveals. Also, the people we speak with are often quite sophisticated about education research and understand its limitations. For example, they assume that showing correlation is the norm for most education research and they assess what is meaningful in that context.

Another point is to apply what has been discovered about the brain: human decision-making is complex. So in talking to decision makers, referencing research that indicates through correlation that the arts are good for a range of student outcomes is useful objective case making. I often start here, as decision makers feel responsible for grounding policy in research. However, it is also important to talk about what is truly compelling about arts education. So I try to connect with what a person really believes about the arts, which is based in their life's experience. What is most effective is if I bring with me someone who is from the person's district who can talk about what is happening in the arts to children in a school where they live.

A third point—for my colleagues and myself, advocacy is not just using a megaphone—it is rolling up our sleeves and becoming working collaborators--the measure of successful advocacy is building effective relationships and partnerships. We have a stake; we are not just making a case. We are invested in learning what works and what doesn't for the sake of children. And we see the larger picture; we are well informed about all of the goals in education.

Another critical point in being an effective advocate is to be actively engaged at all levels—state, district, individual school and even individual classroom. Unless one sees the whole picture and how the moving parts fit together, one's impact is seriously limited. Advocating for a policy approach at the state level absent

understanding how it impacts the teacher and hence the student leads to misallocation of resources and loss of credibility. Further, ownership by key people at all levels is crucial for success. And finally, if one is strategic, it is possible to effectively leverage policy formulation, its implementation and specific program initiatives that are complementary.

To give specific insight on use of research, there are two particular studies that I would cite -- the single most useful study for me is James Catterall's analysis of the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) data.²⁰ It's the view from 30,000 feet and it hits solidly the issue of equity, which is really where the rubber meets the road for arts education, by showing data on the benefits of the arts on low SES populations. It is directly applicable to policy

It is also valuable to use finer grained research as well. I like another Caterall study that was done giving a prompt about ancient Egypt. One group of students was asked to draw first, then write. Another group was directed straight to the writing task. The students who drew first made careful drawings of the sarcophagus and cartouches and so on--The results showed better organized and more detailed written responses from the students who drew first. The improvement in writing was particularly true for students with limited skill in English. I like this study because it's about visual art, it's about equity, it's concrete, and it is elegant. I also like it because it provides useful insight for practitioners as well as telling an interesting story that is good for advocacy.

In thinking about the need and usefulness of needed research, I put the primary emphasis on its potential to help those engaged in teaching in and through the arts understand what is happening in their teaching, approach the art of teaching with a spirit of inquiry, grow and improve in their practice and validate their convictions about their teaching and its value. And so while researchers may have a stream of inquiry, which is abstractly of interest, how much more compelling might research be that through intersection with educational theory and -- even more important -- practice will change children's lives in wonderful ways. Research really should be about valuable significant questions for practitioners. To impact policy it should be grounded in substance and relevant to the classroom. Whatever the inquiry, it is critical to look deeply at arts processes and their relationship to thinking and learning so that the research will be meaningful and not superficial. And then those of us as advocates will have even richer stories to tell about how the arts benefit children to make the case for supporting high quality arts education.

Special importance of the arts for disadvantaged children living in challenging situations

To speak about the importance of the arts to very young children who are surviving traumatic or challenging circumstances, I will do that as an artist as well as advocate.

To begin, I would note the therapeutic element of articulating through art what may be inaccessible through language. As a visual artist, I draw in part to

discover my own mental state, emotions, obsessions, dreams and compulsions. Further, to take these and make something out of them is powerful. In response to acute pain, I am able to hold it, to grasp it and make it into something less painful, to rub the sharp edges off, or, to use a metaphor, to layer on accretions and make the sharp grain of sand into a pearl. In the throes of a tragic event in my life, it was extraordinary to go into the studio and watch myself work because everything I did was life affirming; in my art I fought death. I believe that for even a very young child this can happen.

Another important psychological aspect to art whether created by the very young or not is that art voices the great "I am". No matter the age of the artist, there is a critical transaction. The artist creates a work that expresses their own ideas and emotions and gives it to others who receive the gift. Esthetic pleasure, insight and feeling are exchanged between human beings. The exchange is humanizing and authentic and important; it promotes equality and respect.

What is critical and makes this most positive is that the work of the child is taken seriously. While skill is to be recognized, it is important to respect content no matter the facility of the child. The more vulnerable the child the more the quality and sensitivity of the teacher needs to be carefully honed.

Arts education has well validated intellectual and cognitive benefits for all children.

The arts provide cultural literacy; a child denied cultural literacy is denied social mobility. There is a lid on their aspirations. If one were to, in a Machiavellian spirit, decide to create a permanent underclass, an efficient way to do so would be the restriction of culture. The arts are subtle and nuanced languages; to be articulate in the arts is taken for granted in middle and upper class society.

A tension in public education has existed around class in the United States. Is public education designed to create citizens in a democracy and by implication equal members of society equipped to enjoy "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" or is it to provide an effective labor force which will enrich the country and maintain the social status quo wherein the privileged classes have superior educational opportunities through private education or because they live in areas that devote more resources to education than are allocated in poorer communities given tax codes?

From the report: *Young Children and the Arts: Making Creative Connections, A Report of the Task Force on Children's Learning and the Arts: Birth to Age Eight* comes the following insight into arts experiences for young children:

A close look at what constitutes the best kind of experience for infants and young children leads to the arts. From a child's first lullaby, to a three-year-old's experimentation with finger paint, to a seven-year-old's dramatization of a favorite story, developmentally appropriate arts experience is critical. For all children, at all ability levels, the arts play a central role in cognitive, motor, language, and socio-emotional development. The arts motivate and engage

children in learning, stimulate memory and facilitate understanding, enhance symbolic communication, promote relationships, and provide an avenue for building competence. The arts are natural for young children. Child development specialists note that play is the business of young children; play is the way children promote and enhance their development. The arts are a most natural vehicle for play.... (Introduction, page v)

The report goes on to recommend three principles for arts education for young children starting on page 2:

PRINCIPLE: Children should be encouraged to learn in, through and about the arts by actively engaging in the processes of creating, participating in/performing, and responding to quality arts experiences, adapted to their developmental levels and reflecting their own culture.

Under this principle, the following is noted:

As they engage in the artistic process, children learn that they can observe, organize and interpret their experiences. They can make decisions, take actions, and monitor the effect of those actions. They can create form and meaning where none existed before. The arts experience becomes a source of communication and interaction for children and adults.

PRINCIPLE: Arts activities and experiences, while maintaining the integrity of the arts disciplines, should be meaningful to children, follow a scope and sequenced, and connect to early childhood curriculum and appropriate practices. They may also contribute to literacy development.

Related to this principle, the following is noted:

Through arts education, very young children can experience nontraditional modes of learning that develop intrapersonal, interpersonal, spatial, kinesthetic and logic abilities, skills, and knowledge, as well as, traditional modes of learning that develop mathematical and linguistic abilities, skills, and knowledge. Because children learn in multiple ways, activities should reflect these multiple ways of knowing and doing. (Page 4).

PRINCIPLE: The development of early childhood program (including resources and materials) should be shared among arts education specialists, practicing artists, early childhood educators, parents, and caregivers; and the process should connect to community resources.²¹

Future Work:

A significant issue is that children living in poverty and other challenging circumstances do not have advocates as their parents may be absent or themselves marginalized. The challenge is to engage and mobilize powerful people on their behalf. The arguments described above can all be marshaled

and used strategically. It is also important to have fresh stories to tell of successful initiatives that have changed lives and new research affording expanded insights into the human mind and how children learn in and through the arts.

Going forward, for advocacy purposes it would be helpful to augment research on benefits to this population of arts education. In framing the research and the arguments to convince a larger society it may be important to consider not only the impact on the individual child's life over time but also the societal impact. Given competing needs, policy makers' responses may be driven by pragmatic concerns as much as if not more than moral commitments, that is even assuming that they understand the moral issues around equity in arts education. Historically the arts have been closely tied to socio-economic class. This remains a major challenge.

From a larger perspective, there is great irony considering that so many of the world's conflicts are around culture—fear and resentment of the “other” and strong tribal fealty. Enhancing cultural literacy theoretically should build cultural tolerance. The research compendium *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*, Richard J. Deasy, editor, Arts Education Partnership includes studies correlating drama education in particular with the development of tolerance and understanding of moral values. This is another avenue that merits further attention in the context of global challenges and human welfare.

The work we need to do is daunting but in the exponential growth in human knowledge and understanding across all arenas, the arts are affirmed. As scientists and others delve into the workings of our senses and minds, the arts are revealed as fundamental to our being. And as we look out at the cosmos through the lens of the Hubble telescope, the response of every human being, scientist or layperson, is first and foremost to the awesome beauty. Our beholding and articulation is esthetically driven. Our consciousness is shaped through and by the arts. This is every child's birthright.

Resources:

¹ *Hard Fun: Transforming Education Through The Arts*, Earthome Productions, 2007, available through AEMS Alliance www.aems-edu.com

² Daniel H. Pink, 2006, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future*, Penguin Books (Note that Dan Pink has a new book being published later this year, *Drive; The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*) www.danpink.com

³ Thomas L. Friedman, 2006, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty First Century*, Farrar Straus & Giroux, www.thomaslfriedman.com

⁴ Drake Bennett, April 5, 2009, *The other kind of smart: Is it time for schools to try to boost kids' emotional intelligence?* Boston Globe
www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/04/05/the_other_kind_of_smart/

⁵ Richard J. Deasy, editor, 2002, *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*, Arts Education Partnership
www.aep-arts.org

⁶ Paul Tough, September 27, 2009 *The Make-Believe Solution: Can imaginary play teach children to control their impulses—and be better students?* New York Times Magazine http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/magazine/27tools-t.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=NY%20Times%20Magazine%20September%2027&st=cse

⁷ Richard E. Nisbett, 2009, *Intelligence and How to Get It: Why Schools and Culture Count*, W. W. Norton & Company

⁸ Malcolm Gladwell, 2008, *Outliers: The Story of Success*
<http://www.gladwell.com/outliers/index.html>

⁹ Alison Gopnik, August 16, 2009, *Your Baby Is Smarter Than You Think*, New York Times
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/opinion/16gopnik.html?scp=1&sq=Alison%20Gopnik&st=cse>

¹⁰ Arts Education Partnership, Sara Goldhawk, Editor, *Young Children and the Arts: Making Creative Connections, A Report of the Task Force on Children's Learning and the Arts: Birth to Age Eight*, www.aep-arts.org

¹¹ Michael Posner, Ph.D. et. al., 2008, *How Arts Training Influences Cognition, Learning, Arts, and the Brain, the Dana Consortium Report on Arts and Cognition*, Dana Foundation
<http://www.dana.org/news/publications/publication.aspx?id=10760>

¹² Elizabeth Spelke, 2008, *Effects of Music Instruction on Developing Cognitive Systems at the Foundations of Math and Science, Learning, Arts, and the Brain, the Dana Consortium Report on Arts and Cognition*, Dana Foundation
<http://www.dana.org/news/publications/publication.aspx?id=10760>

¹³ Daniel J. Levitan, 2006, *This is Your Brain on Music*, excerpt is from the Plume, 2007 edition, pp 226.

¹⁴ Johns Hopkins University Neuro-Education Initiative
<http://education.jhu.edu/nei/>

¹⁵ Celinda Lake, 2008, Lake Research Partners, www.theimagination.net

¹⁶ Howard Gardner, <http://www.howardgardner.com/MI/mi.html>

¹⁷ Richard J. Deasy, March 2009, Role of the Arts and 21st Century teaching and Learning, Keynote for the Deans Roundtable Powerpoint, University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), available through AEMS Alliance www.aems-edu.com/programs.php

Additional information on 21st century skills is available from the 21st Century Skills Partnership <http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/>

¹⁸ *Race to the Top*, US Department of Education www.ed.gov

¹⁹ Steve Seidel, Shari Tishman, Ellen Winner, Lois Hetland, Patricia Palmer, Project Zero, 2009, *The Qualities of Quality: Understanding Excellence in Arts Education*, Harvard University, Wallace Foundation <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/ArtsParticipation/Pages/Qualities-of-Quality-Understanding-Excellence-in-Arts-Education.aspx>

²⁰ James Catterall *et.al.*, 1999, *Involvement in the Arts and Human Development: General Involvement and Intensive Involvement in Music and Theater Arts, Champions of Change*, Arts Education Partnership (note that Catterall's work is also included in the AEP publication, *Critical Links*), www.aep-arts.org

²¹ *Op. Cit.*, Arts Education Partnership

Additional websites for reference include:

Americans for the Arts www.artsusa.org

Kennedy Center Alliance for Arts Education www.kennedy-center.org/education/kcaen

ArtsEdge <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org>

National Endowment for the Arts arts.endow.gov

National Assembly of State Arts Agencies www.nasaa-arts.org