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Contemporary Issues in American Arts

5 October, 2021

Final Paper: Arts Education in America's Public School System

There was a time in America's past when it was normal for families to gather round the piano in their living rooms and sing with each other. It was normal for families to regularly attend the theater to see plays, musicals, symphonies, orchestras, and world renowned musicians. Most students played an instrument, sang in choir, participated in drama, or created art. It was an important part of a well rounded education. "High-quality arts education programs have existed in...schools and communities for years" (Bodilly et al 47). So what happened to this notion? Why did the arts take a backseat and why do arts education advocates run into constant pushback from the public school community whenever they fight to keep their programs afloat?

Michael M. Kaiser speaks to the fact that there has been a "steady decline in quality and amount of arts education in most communities" in his book *Curtains? The Future of the Arts in America* (51). The first generation of students to not receive a comprehensive arts education through their public schooling includes a mix of millennials and xennials, or those who are now roughly 25-45 years old. Their children have become the second generation to grow up in a world where the arts are not valued because they were not given access to systemic arts education (Kaiser 57-58). What we are beginning to see with this new generation, or Gen Z and Gen Alpha, is that the demand for arts education is shrinking and schools are putting their focus elsewhere (Kaiser 53, 57).

The generational decline in the value of arts education is only one piece to the puzzle. In order to get to the root of the matter, we have to look back into the last century. In the early 1900's

there had been a successful anti-homework movement, even leading to California prohibiting homework for students under the age of 15. However, homework made a comeback in the late 1950's. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union launched the first satellite, Sputnik, into orbit and sparked the worldwide space race. In response, the US passed the NDEA, the National Defense Education Act. This "one billion dollar package to improve STEM related education" turned the focus of high school curriculums toward analytical thinking skills, rather than the arts and humanities. The NDEA also contributed to the rise of homework, leaving students with less time to participate in extracurricular activities, such as the arts. The STEM focus would continue to play a role in the downward trend of arts education, despite slight arts resurgences in the coming decades. "Even though many of the actions that caused the decline in arts education were inadvertent, willful choices to decrease funding for arts education also contributes to the decline." (ThroughTeenLenses.com)

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act made a push for standards-based education by having states establish measurable goals and develop assessments for subjects deemed as necessary, basic skills (ED.gov). Although the arts were officially recognized as a core subject through NCLB, schools struggled to find time within the school day to give arts education the attention it deserves (Bodilly et al 23). The new standards-based system requirements for math and reading forced teachers to "teach to the test" or risk losing their district's much needed federal funding (Bodilly et al 16). "The coupling of test-based accountability that focuses primarily on reading and mathematics scores...had a negative impact on arts education" (Bodilly et al 17).

No Child Left Behind also put priority in placing quality teachers into schools. Fast forward to the 2008 financial crisis, where arts and humanities job opportunities were slim and the job market across the board was unstable and insecure. People were not pursuing careers in the arts because they didn't see a future with a steady income, nor were they taught the value of the arts through their educational opportunities. "The marginalization of arts education within schools may

[have been] associated with the decline in the number of arts specialists retained in districts” (Bodilly et al 17). Although NCLB attempted to counter the downward trend of the arts and many other issues plaguing the American public education system, their efforts fell short for many reasons. Standardized testing and a lack of funding for arts education forced many programs into a downward spiral. These decisions disproportionately impacted communities of color and those from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. “Withholding a severe change in the way the nation views arts education, the decline of the arts in the U.S. will only continue, which would deprive kids of the potential benefits arts education could offer” (ThroughTeenLenses.com).

There are many obstacles we face in arts education. Parks categorizes these obstacles into technical issues, which can be solved through current procedures and skills, and adaptive problems, which “require new learning, innovation, and patterns of behavior” (10). When I first began researching the decline of arts education in America, I assumed the bulk of the issues would be adaptive. I thought that it was a matter of changing the public’s perception of arts education and inspiring our communities to embrace the benefits of the arts. While many of these problems seem to be adaptive on the surface, when they are broken down, the foundation is technical. There is a wealth of research and information backing up the positive impact of arts education. What proponents of the arts lack is a consensus on why and how to impart content and experience to students. “Arts education initiatives start from a weak position compared with those in other fields of education” (Bodilly et al 9). “[B]looming research documenting the benefits of arts education combined with differing views on what the goals of arts education should be” (Bodilly et al 12) have overloaded us with supporting information without offering step by step directions for achieving success.

The research is indeed overwhelming. The reasons for including the arts in academics are seemingly endless. The arts are a core subject according to NCLB; they are part of a well-rounded education. Exposure to arts education is related to increased performance in other school subjects,

whether taught independently or integrated into those subjects. Arts education increases “motivation, social development, self-confidence, perseverance, and stress reduction” (Bodilly et al 13). The arts meet many of the needs of human development, including motivation and life skills like social interaction, engagement and practice. These are literally skills we are currently trying to implement, unsuccessfully, into our curriculum right now. These skills are very much needed after a year and a half of remote learning, due to the Covid pandemic. So why, even with all this research based knowledge, are we still choosing not to support arts education? According to a Los Angeles Arts for All leader, “we don’t need more why...we’re at the how...we lack clear implementation strategies” (qtd. In Bodilly et al 53).

All this time, arts education advocates have assumed that what people need to hear is WHY arts education matters. I’ll admit, that’s been my strategy as well. It’s never occurred to me, and presumably many others, that it’s not about the WHY; it’s about HOW. And while I do believe many of our problems are rooted in adapting the community’s mindset, I’m now beginning to see that, perhaps, the reason we haven’t been successful in changing the course of our fate is because we haven’t been thinking about HOW arts education functions as part of every child’s education.

While pondering this idea of why versus how, I was brought back to elementary writing methods of how to expand your ideas by answering six basic questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how? These six questions seemed appropriate when organizing my thoughts, and so I pose the following questions, in response to attempting to discover why we, as arts education partisans, have not been able to agree on the HOW.

Who is responsible for delivering arts education?

What is the goal of arts education?

When do we offer students arts education?

Where are funding and resources coming from to support arts education?

Why do students need arts education?

How do we ensure students are receiving quality arts education?

WHO There is a lot of discrepancy surrounding who should be responsible for delivering arts education to students. First of all, there is the question of stand alone arts education or integrated arts programs. Do we want students to appreciate the arts in relation to their “core” classes or do we want students to make those connections within a separate class (Bodilly et al 14)? Both have their advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, arts integration, when done correctly, can elevate classroom experiences to new levels and leave students with incredible memories. The question becomes whether the classroom teacher also functions as an arts teacher or if arts teachers work collaboratively on integrated projects. And then there is the question of stand alone classes - how do opportunities like ensembles fit into an integrated program? How do we encourage artistic minds who want to take their interests a step further in an integrated program?

As STEM became the focus of public schools and arts programs started getting cut, a variety of alternatives came into play. Additionally, the cost of living increased while the average family income was not proportionately rising. Many parents, who used to be the main providers of care outside of school, found themselves having to work to make ends meet, thus opening up opportunities for arts enrichment outside of the public school setting. “[C]ommunity-based providers, cultural organizations, and OST (out-of-school-time) providers”, such as daycares and before/after school programs like the YMCA, have taken on the role of filling in the gaps within students’ arts education (Bodilly et al 19). While families are grateful their children are given additional opportunities for arts enrichment, arts educators may feel a sense of competition with these extracurricular offerings outside of school. For me personally, it’s been difficult to recruit our strongest singers to participate in drama club productions when they are more interested in community theater productions elsewhere. At what point does too much outside help become harmful to the efforts of public school arts education programs?

We also encounter difficulty finding highly qualified teachers, per NCLB. “The marginalization of arts education within schools may be associated with the decline in the number of arts specialists retained in districts” (Bodilly et al 17). Many teachers who are currently in education are leaving the profession because they are tired of having to teach math and reading in place of their arts content. Teachers are tired of advocating for their programs, only to have their positions cut to part time or cut entirely due to budget cuts. We’re also beginning to see the effects of the 2008 financial crisis, when high school graduates were encouraged to pursue careers outside of the arts and humanities. The teacher shortage will continue to affect our education system, but arts education is especially at risk, given its already difficult journey through the last 60 years.

WHAT Determining the goal of arts education may be one of the most difficult decisions we have to make. In the book *Revitalizing Arts Education Through Community-Wide Coordination*, authors Bodilly, Augustine, and Zakaras pose two opposing goals that continue to be debated today. The first is that “the creation of art, sees the goal as mastery of one particular art form” (12). The other “goal is to build artistic appreciation and outlook, which may include by is not primarily focused on producing art” (12). When I think about these two goals in relation to the push for competency-based education in public schools today, both of these goals are achievable, depending on each student’s individual goals, wants, and needs. Arts educators should approach their teaching with the second goal of appreciating the arts, and if students build a personal connection to an artform and wish to continue that path, their mindset shifts to the first goal of mastery. I believe that many students are turned off of arts education because teachers expect perfection and mastery, rather than nurturing a joy and appreciation for the arts.

WHEN I have struggled with *when* arts education should take place in my ten years as a teacher. Specifically this year, my colleague and I find ourselves restricted to fifty minutes out of each day to service 150 students through individual and small group lessons each week. The reasoning? According to my principal, “you don’t pull students out of music for Social Studies.”

Essentially, what he is saying is that it's not appropriate to pull students from core classes once a week for instrumental lessons because the opposite doesn't exist. What I find ironic about this statement is that students DO, in fact, get pulled from music for other services. They are forced to drop arts classes so they can have additional time with student services remediation and intervention. They are pulled from arts classes for counseling. Our school's unspoken rule for arts classes is that "if they get each arts class twice within their three years here, we're doing our job". What a horrible mindset to have.

As if that's not enough, students also have 35 minutes of WIN (What I Need) every day for yet more intervention and remediation. Arts educators are expected to plan and implement math and reading intervention lessons without training or proper certifications. Students also have 25 minutes of flex time each day, which is essentially a study hall that can also be used for remediation and intervention. On any given day, one student could have an hour of intervention/remediation time, plus 50 minutes of student services. That is more than 25% of the entire school day spent on intervention/remediation alone, and we are concerned about a 25 minute music lesson once a week. It's no wonder our arts education programs struggle to be seen as legitimate (Bodilly et al 23). "Despite the arts' position as a core subject in the national education goals in NCLB legislation, its place in school curriculum is being eroded by NCLB's requirements for and focus on reading and mathematics...Instructional time is increasingly dedicated to "teaching to" the standardized tests, and non-tested subjects, such as the arts and foreign languages, are most at risk for marginalization" (Bodilly et al 16).

Of course, you could suggest that after school time could be used for additional time with students, but after school time is reserved for extracurricular activities, such as athletics and clubs, and homework. There is simply not enough time in the day for students who want to do it all. If they're not getting proper arts education during the school day, it's certainly not a possibility outside of those seven hours without sacrificing other activities.

WHERE The arts are the first programs and positions to be cut when financial strain hits. Where is the funding coming from if a school district cannot afford to keep their arts programs? NCLB has forced districts into an impossible position with standardized testing - if test scores are not high enough, a district will lose its federal funding (ED.gov). This scenario is ironic, considering that the districts who do not test well are undoubtedly the ones who need federal funding the most. School districts with high populations of people of color and people with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to suffer from poor test scores, in addition to limited access to quality arts education. In this way, arts education is seen “as a social justice issue, arguing that uneven access is unfair” (Bodilly et al 49). Because of the push for STEM studies, the arts find themselves “competing with school subjects that have the benefits of greater attention and greater resources” (Bodilly et al 23).

There are many organizations that are trying to assist financially where public school programs have failed, such as philanthropic organizations and government agencies (Bodilly et al 18). Those efforts are meant with the best of intentions, but it’s impossible to ensure that all students are receiving comparable arts exposure and experience. Students do not always have equal access to arts education, due to the emphasis on tested subjects, like math and ELA, and because not all students are able to receive arts enrichment outside of school. Ideally, a thriving arts education program in school, during the school day, is the best way to ensure equal access and provide quality arts education opportunities to all children, regardless of their place in life (Bodilly 49).

WHY As mentioned before, the reason for needing arts education does not seem to be the issue at this point. Anyone with access to the internet can find countless research proving the importance of arts education for developing minds. Rather, we should be asking: why do the arts have to continuously advocate for their programs while other extracurriculars, such as after school athletics (not even part of the core curriculum) are praised for teaching the exact same concepts?

HOW Finally, we reach how. How do we ensure that students are receiving quality arts education? How do we implement our goals? In 1994, the National Standards for Arts Education were introduced. More recently, the arts have adopted the more detailed and structured Common Core Arts Standards. And while the intent of standards-based education is to set clear, achievable goals, “all of these federal standards for subjects are voluntary; there is no enforcement mechanism” (Bodilly et al 15). I have my own personal opinions on the Common Core Standards; I feel as though we are micromanaging beyond what is helpful, especially within the arts. I don’t agree with grades as a whole, but that is a conversation for another time.

So HOW do we successfully revitalize arts education in the American education system? It’s not an easy task, as evidenced by the fact that we’ve been fighting this battle for sixty plus years. Adaptive problems “call for changes of the heart and mind - the transformation of long-standing habits and deeply held assumptions and values (Parks 10). We, as a society, have to unlearn the idea that “a balanced education - including literature, history, and the arts - is now considered a luxury (Kaiser 51-52). The current focus on STEM, which truly should be STEAM to include the Arts, has left us with two generations that do not see the arts as a viable career path. We are doing our children a real disservice by not educating them “to think of the arts as a vital, consistent part of their lives” (Kaiser 51). If arts educators can come together with a common goal and a realistic plan for implementing changes, perhaps we can set a course for a brighter future that includes the arts. “Coordinated efforts among providers and influencers of arts education would seem to be the most natural way to jointly overcome the challenges” (Bodilly et al 24). I find myself struggling with this issue especially in my position, as I am unable to energize my music coworkers to acknowledge the issues at hand, set realistic goals, and create a step by step plan that will set us on the path to success. Many of my coworkers are near retirement or perhaps have one foot out the door, so they do not see it in their best interests to put effort into a program when they will not be sticking

around for the results. At what point does the HOW become more about our students and less about ourselves? Isn't that how decisions in education should always be made?

Authors Bodilly, Augustine, and Zakaras lay out a comprehensive, step by step approach to tackling the issues the arts are facing in their book *Revitalizing Arts Education Through Community-Wide Coordination*. They came up with eight steps after studying various school districts and their successes with implementing arts education projects (48-53).

1. First comes the inspection and evaluation of your arts education programs - the first step is figuring out what you have and what you need (48).
2. From there, you set your goals. While each program may have different goals that fit their specific situation, it's important that we all have the common goal of ensuring that every child has equal access to arts education (48).
3. Next comes strategic planning. In education, we call this backwards design. Once you've decided your end goal, break down the steps to small, achieve those goals. This is what administrators want to see - that you're able to see both the big picture and the steps needed to get there (49).
4. Constructing a case is where I feel many programs fall apart. Choose your WHY and train everyone to use the same language (50).
5. Collecting and advocating for resources is always a challenge. Programs are often surviving off grant money. Ask for appropriate time and class space during the school day, seek out qualified teachers to fill available positions, and budget for what you need. Even if your requests are denied, if you keep asking year after year, you'll have consistent documentation of those needs (50-51).
6. This step was most intriguing to me, especially considering this graduate program's purpose. They suggest hiring an arts education coordinator that is highly placed within the school district administration. "The rationale behind establishing an arts coordination

position is that district-level arts education officials can advocate for the arts and secure a place for them in the district's core curriculum" (51). We already have athletic directors, directors of curriculum, directors of special education, etc. Why can't we also have a position to lead and advocate for our arts programs?

7. Next, expand individual and organizational knowledge and understanding of the arts. We are entering a time where both principals and fellow teachers may not have had access to a proper arts education. We must ensure they recognize the value of arts education (52). We must also offer "professional development and technical assistance to schools to assist teachers in arts education provision and administrators in planning for, supporting, and providing leadership for arts education" (52). If we are successful at instilling the importance of the arts, the hope is that some of our students will be inspired enough to choose to enter the field of arts education, thus continuing the cycle and putting more arts advocates on our side (53).
8. Finally, we end with advocating. "Arts education needs constant advocacy" (53). Only after all these other steps have been taken, should we then come back to our WHY.

It looks like an awful lot of work, and it is. Fortunately, there are many organizations out there willing to help. I could write another ten pages on these, but instead, I've chosen three organizations that I have utilized in the past year. First is the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, led by a variety of arts organizations across the country. Currently, they are running a campaign called Arts ARE Education. They have a pledge that individuals, teachers, schools, districts, administrators, school boards, and government officials can sign to prove their commitment to rebuilding our arts education programs post Covid. They also offer resources to advocates and teach them how to appropriately and effectively communicate with the leadership in their school districts. Arts ARE Education is raising money with the leadership of Young Audiences Arts for Living, whose "mission is to inspire young people and expand their learning through the

arts.” Funds from these efforts go directly toward advocating at all levels for arts education. Arts ARE Education also continues to fight for federal funding for arts education and they actively communicate with legislation to make sure our plight stays relevant.

One of the leading organizations involved with the NCCAS is the National Association for Music Educators (NAfME). Formerly known as the Music Educators National Conference (MENC), this organization has grown exponentially and continues to support music educators in countless ways, from offering professional development to supporting advocacy campaigns and research. I have been a member of NAfME since I was in college and their resources have been extremely helpful in my career.

Lastly, the National Coalition on Aerosol Study, a huge collaboration led by the National Federation of High School Associations (NFHS), NAfME, and countless other arts organizations, has been an invaluable resource during this pandemic. Not only has this collaborative group been tirelessly advocating for our safety and ensuring that the performing arts are not left behind during this difficult time, but they have stepped up as leaders in advocacy and are continuously offering resources for educators to use as we navigate this strange circumstance.

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