

**Abstract:** Research studies have indicated numerous benefits of participating in Arts education. These include increased engagement, development of motivation and confidence, and the ability to think creatively and critically (Rusinek, 2008). The Artist-in-Residence (AIR) Project in the YRDSB is one such program that provides an equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students, in particular those who are at-risk or marginalized. This article will examine research findings on the positive impact that Arts education has on student engagement, well-being, and achievement. Connections will be made to the YRDSB AIR Project to understand how the Arts eliminate barriers and provide a safe and inclusive learning environment for students so they can be successful and future-ready.

**Keywords:** equity, inclusion, Arts education, elimination of barriers, relevant learning, 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies, modern learning

## **Introduction**

*Education in the arts is essential to students' intellectual, social, physical, and emotional growth and well-being. Experiences in the arts – in dance, drama, music, and visual arts play a valuable role in helping students to achieve their potential as learners to participate fully in their community and in society as a whole. (The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8, The Arts, 2009).*

Research studies have indicated numerous benefits for students who participate in Arts education. The benefits include increased engagement, development of motivation and confidence, and the ability to think creatively and critically (Rusinek,

2008). The Artist-in-Residence (AIR) Project in the YRDSB is one of the programs that helps to create equitable and inclusive learning environments for all students, in particular those who are at-risk or marginalized. Through examining research studies and teacher and student documentation of their experiences in the AIR project, we will understand more about the impact Arts education has on student well-being and achievement.

### **The Inclusive Nature of Arts Education and its Impact on Keeping Students in School**

When participating in the Arts, students and teachers often have a specific visible goal to achieve, which keeps students in school (Rusinek, 2008). In order to understand why adolescents who failed in all other subjects can be highly engaged with music learning, Rusinek (2008) conducted a case study in a compulsory general music class at a Spanish public secondary school. The students' general disengagement from learning seemed to be a reaction to teachers' declarative, textbook-based teaching strategies. In contrast, the music teacher generated student enthusiasm through an inclusive pedagogy. In keeping with the principle of "music for all," students in each class created orchestral percussive arrangement and performances of pop, classical, and film music. The subject narrative, "the goal is the concert," was shared by both the teacher and students, and had been widely accepted as an important part of the school culture. Through observations and video simulated interviews with the teacher, students, parents, and administrators, the researchers found that although the group of initially students rejected the school academic culture, in the end, they decided to work diligently, cooperatively, and positively to be included in the school musical culture. The

improved cooperation was created by the motivational strategies in school music education. It was found that preparing for a musical performance such as a concert was motivating because a concert provided short-term goals that were visual and achievable. Preparing for a concert provided an authentic learning situation where students were required to think and act like professional musicians, building a sense of responsibility and accountability to their group (Rusinek, 2008).

Similarly, Kinder and Harland (2004) reviewed some key findings from the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER). The researchers' central questions focused on whether, how, and why Arts education might make a contribution to effective strategies aimed at addressing disengaged learners and in preventing disengagement from learning and educational opportunity. The findings showed that the inclusion of disengaged learners provided an outlet that kept them more engaged and out of trouble. For example, one youngster in Harland, Kinder, and Hartley's study (1995) of young people's participation stated, "[I]f I wasn't here doing the art project, I'd be out stealing cars and doing drugs" (p.118). Supporting this, Boyes and Reid (2005) reported that some students, particularly those labeled as "troublesome," had a change in attitude after participating in an integrated Arts program. Burnard (2008) also found that inclusive music education was often used as a successful vehicle to re-engage unmotivated learners in UK secondary schools. Burnard further concluded that students were re-engaged in music because they were able to develop a mutually respectful relationship with their music teacher. Researchers reporting in *Champion of Change* (Fiske, 1999) found that the Arts provided a reason, and sometimes the only reason for engaging in school activities or in extra-curricular programs (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles,

1999; Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999; Heath & Roach, 1999). Burton et al. (1999) examined young people who were considered classroom failures and found that these students often became the high-achievers in Arts learning settings. I, too, have seen this phenomenon in my own teaching. Those students whom homeroom teachers labeled as “trouble-makers” were often the most engaged, motivated, and talented musicians in my instrumental music classes. In addition, Catterall et al (1999) found that students were motivated to learn not just for test results or other performance outcomes, but also for the learning experience itself.

The Artist-in-Residence (AIR) Program in the YRDSB has similar effects in keeping students in school. The AIR Program allows students, teachers, and local artists to work collaboratively to create personalized Art-based projects that are relevant to students’ interests and address the specific needs of each school. These projects can be in Music, Drama, Dance, Visual Art, or Media Art. The AIR program has been especially impactful in engaging students, in particular, those at the alternative education program. In YRDSB, a personalized alternative education (PAE) is a system of educational alternatives that are distinguished from main stream programming in that they frequently use unconventional classroom settings and altered timetables in order to service the individual needs of the students. Students who attend this alternative education program are normally those who are marginalized or at-risk due to various factors such as poverty, class, race, or socio-economic factors. Through teacher interviews, it was found that students who normally did not have consistent attendance at our alternative education program have “never missed a day” during the time of the AIR project. The teacher provided an example where a student skipped lunch because

she felt that she was behind as she had missed the first day of the AIR project. When she wanted to stay longer after school hours to paint, the teacher had to encourage her to go home. The teachers also noticed how students were able to articulate their feelings and thoughts more expressively through specific phrases, quotes, and items they painted compared to a normal writing task. Overall, teachers felt the AIR project had a positive impact in keeping students in school.

### **Arts Education and Engagement in Learning**

Further studies have looked at the positive effect an Arts education can have on students' engagement. In a study on Learning Through the Arts (LTTA), a Canadian school-wide Arts-education approach where the Arts were integrated in the teachings of other subject areas (e.g., making a quilt stitched with facts about Canada, lantern making as an introduction to geometry, or designing and using raps to learn times tables), it was found that involvement in the Arts went hand in hand with engagement in learning at school (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005). One teacher reflected that students were very attentive during the artist day and therefore learned more (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005). A parent stated that her child became more diligent about completing homework and remembering important information, and that her child became more excited about school and her subjects, even the ones of which her child was not fond of (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005). The LTTA final report to the Royal Conservatory of Music indicated that students were happier to come to school than their peers in the control-group schools, which was a difference that did not exist at the beginning of this three-year study (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005).

Furthermore, Uptis (2011) explained the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits the Arts offer to elementary students. Intrinsic benefits include opportunities to explore creativity and imagination, and see the beauty and to enrich the quality of our lives, as well as develop effective ways to express thought, knowledge, and feelings. Extrinsic benefits of learning in, about, and through the Arts include increased engagement in learning in other subject areas, and development of students' self-confidence, social skills, and metacognition. In the AIR project at one school, an interview with a teacher indicated how he saw many positive changes in students, especially the development of comfort and trust in sharing personal feelings and lived experiences that furthered students' learning. An example was of a student whose father had passed away in the previous year and how the student effectively shared his feelings through a poem indicating how he cried for his father and eventually led his group into an interpretative dance describing his grief. At the same school, the teacher described another student as someone who was frequently disengaged in class while busying himself with a fidget spinner. During the AIR project, however, he had decided to take on a leadership role by guiding his group through all the tasks. Overall, the teacher expressed that the AIR project provided a safe learning community where students with the hardest buy-in demonstrated increased engagement and developed effective skills in collaborating and communicating with their peers.

### **Arts Education in Eliminating Barriers**

Platz and Collins (2007) noted that students were more engaged in learning in schools in which the Arts were evident; in these schools, students were able to find connection to all subjects, because the Arts provided them with another way to learn

and communicate—without words. In Wilson, Macdonald, Byrne, Ewing, and Sheridan’s study (2008), one secondary Arts teacher noted that the students who obviously thought themselves bad at descriptive writing were producing works that were quite inventive with the help of the Arts. This teacher noted that having students approach writing through the Arts allowed them to express themselves openly and creatively, as opposed to focusing on more traditional teaching pedagogies, where thinking and approaches were evaluated based on being “right” or “wrong. In support of this, Fiske (1999) stated that the Arts reach students who are not otherwise being reached. When well taught, the Arts provide young people with authentic learning experiences that engage their minds, hearts, and bodies. Music making was also seen as both meaningful and expressive for all (Burnard, Dillon, Rusinek, & Saether, 2008). The teachers recognized the power of musical activity to connect them with students, and its inherent capacity to engage in ways that were relevant to the learners and the communities in which they lived.

In the AIR Project, students were asked to reflect on what they felt they learned. In one example, a student expressed how the Arts provided her voice and an opportunity to take risks and step outside of her comfort zone. This student wrote, “What I loved most about the AIR project was that we all had our voices heard and we all had a chance to speak. I think many of us (not all) faced our fears of performing. Performing can be scary for some people but we all learned to grow past that and we learned that it’s not as bad as it seems. And I loved that we all did all of what we did together and everyone helped.” Risk-taking requires a feeling of safety and belonging. The AIR Project eliminated barriers and provided a safe place and outlet for students to

express their learning without judgment. One student wrote, “I feel that I learned more about who I am. At the beginning of the AIR project, I thought that I was the only student in my class that had issues, and stress with socializing. When we all shared our monologues, it made me feel like I belong, and I’m not alone. I was listening to all of the pain that everyone was going through inside, but it doesn’t show on the outside. I always thought that my social peers that were around me, were so confident and didn’t let anyone bring them down, but then I saw another side to them that I could relate to.”

### **The Arts in Supporting Student in Developing Skills to be Future-Ready**

The collaborative inquiry nature of the AIR project further improves the overall instructional programs in our board by providing opportunities for student-directed learning, making learning relevant and meaningful. Because each AIR project is personalized based on the needs of the school and students’ interest, students are encouraged to drive their learning in areas that they are passionate about. This modern learning approach is intentional, responsive, and authentic for students and is based upon an understanding of students’ social identities and how their lived experiences shape their learning experiences. The personalized nature of each project encourages students to take ownership of the learning while simultaneously developing important skills such as collaboration, creativity, problem solving, and communication as students learn to respectfully negotiate with team members and solve problems throughout the learning journey. The creative process of learning in the Arts also provides opportunities for students to take risks in a safe environment, frequently reflecting on their learning using the feedback they receive from their teachers and peers in order to further their thinking. One student wrote, “I feel that the AIR project taught me a lot about how to



work with different people and their different ideas. I learned that I have to accept some ideas that I don't agree with, some people in my group had ideas that didn't always work. We had to find ways to include other people's ideas or tell them that we don't like their idea without making them feel bad. During this process I feel it has helped me realize how to work with my peers better." Thus, the Arts help students develop 21<sup>st</sup> century competency skills that are essential in getting them ready for the workplace.

## **Conclusion**

Experiences in the Arts, whether in dance, drama, music, or visual arts play a valuable role in addressing the diverse needs of our learners today. The Artist-in-Residence Project in the YRDSB is an example of a program that demonstrates how the Arts provide a natural vehicle through which students can explore and express themselves and can discover and interpret the world around them. One student wrote, "Something I loved while doing this project is the fact that everyone worked together and did not exclude." The Arts eliminate barriers and provide a safe place for students to voice themselves through various media, while allowing students to explore and express their learning in creative ways. The Arts engages students by providing authentic student-directed learning opportunities to make learning relevant and meaningful to our 21st century learners. The creative process and inquiry nature in the Arts make the process of learning more important than the final product as learning in, through, and about the Arts encourage students to be critical thinkers and creative problem solvers. Overall, the Arts foster an equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students, especially those at-risk or marginalized, where all learners are supported and are inspired to succeed.



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