

Why Do We Teaching Art in Elementary Schools?

If the teacher does not concern herself with helping children learn what is important in the arts, there is little reason for children to believe that the arts have something worth learning.

-Elliot Eisner



Why do we teach art in schools? On the surface, this seems to be a rather simple question; yet, it is one that elicits a confusing variety of responses from art and classroom teachers preparing to enter in the field. Many believe that art is the only subject in school curriculum where children are able to express their 'creativity' or are allowed to 'release their feelings.' Others believe that art enhances student learning; and, therefore, it should be integrated with the other subjects in the school curriculum. Still others view the primary benefit of art as providing children with something 'fun' to do away from the more rigorous study of the 'academic' subjects in school. Indeed, the place of art in the school curriculum has been justified by a considerable number of diverse and sometimes even contradictory purposes over the years. One may even wonder why art needs any justification at all.

Because our own value systems determine what we say and do as teachers, uncovering those beliefs and examining their validity would seem to be useful. To this end, a brief glimpse at the history of art education is provided in class. In reviewing this history, it is hoped that preparing classroom teachers will be able to identify with one or more of the views expressed; and, thus, be able to examine how their own beliefs fit into the present school context. While each one of us has the right to decide for ourselves what it is we believe, it is helpful to recognize where our belief systems originate and how they impact upon our current practices as teachers.

As presented in this class, the goal of art education in today's elementary schools is *to help children acquire a better understanding of art as a way of learning about themselves and the world around them.* This purpose statement is consistent with contemporary art education theory and practice that stresses the intrinsic value of learning *about* art. Yet, it also recognizes that children can learn a lot *through* art that goes well beyond the knowledge and skills acquired during the art activity itself. Teachers must also consider the important role that children play in the learning process. To this end, a quality elementary art program should provide children with opportunities to learn how: (1) to create and reflect upon their own art work; (2) to respond in a thoughtful manner to the art of others; (3) to value art's unique contribution to human experience; and (4) to relate art to its time and cultural context.