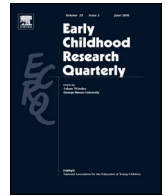




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# The art of Head Start: Intensive arts integration associated with advantage in school readiness for economically disadvantaged children<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The present study examined the impact of intensive arts integration on school readiness for economically disadvantaged children attending Head Start preschool. Participants were 265 children, ages 3–5 years. Of these, 197 attended a fully arts-integrated Head Start, where children received daily music, dance, and visual arts classes in addition to homeroom, and 68 attended a matched comparison program that did not include arts classes. The Bracken Basic Concepts Scale, Third Edition- Receptive (BBCS-3:R) was used to measure children's school readiness at the start and end of a year of preschool attendance. According to a repeated-measures multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), children at the arts-integrated Head Start showed greater gains in school readiness compared to their peers at the comparison program. Univariate tests revealed that attendance at the arts-integrated preschool was associated with greater gains on a general school readiness composite as well as in specific concept areas of texture/material and self/social awareness. Findings suggest that the arts can add value to Head Start preschool. Implications concern the arts as a vehicle for equalizing educational opportunities for young, economically disadvantaged children.

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## 1. Introduction

Approximately, 42% of children are growing up in poor or low-income households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The results are clear. Economic hardship places children at risk for a host of difficulties in cognitive and social-emotional domains (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Head Start and related preschool programs promote positive development but fall

short of equalizing educational outcomes for economically disadvantaged children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Although early childhood programs cannot be expected to erase the power of poverty, it is incumbent upon us to continue to explore how we might promote positive outcomes for children facing economic adversity. The present study examines the impact of arts-integrated preschool programming on the development of school readiness skills for economically disadvantaged children.

### 1.1. Background on the arts and school readiness

The idea that the arts might benefit children's overall cognitive development is not new, but is controversial. The philosopher Nelson Goodman recognized this when he founded Harvard's Project Zero in 1967, noting that the arts and cognition should be studied but that "zero" had been definitively established (Gardner, 2013). Fifty years later, and with considerable study by Goodman and his colleagues such as Howard Gardner, there have been meaningful developments in theory and research (Gardner, 2013), yet questions remain about the benefits of the arts for the development of non-arts competencies (Sala & Gobet, 2017). These questions are particularly important ones to address during an era in which

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expanding access to early childhood education often has been tied to outcomes-based assessment, and preschools have faced increasing pressure to replace music, dance, visual arts, sociodramatic play, and other creative activities with deskwork and drilling on letters, numbers, and other school readiness concepts (Reed, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2012).

Several strands of theoretical and empirical evidence suggest the potential for the arts to promote the school readiness of children at risk via economic disadvantage, and we will highlight three. The first concerns the diverse learning opportunities afforded by arts education. The second concerns the potential for the arts to promote emotional experiences that facilitate learning. The third focuses on the possibility that arts modalities such as music, dance, and visual arts train cognitive abilities that hold relevance beyond the arts. We will also highlight remaining questions regarding the role of the arts for promoting school readiness. In particular, there are questions about whether intensive arts integration can add value to already well developed programs such as Head Start and further promote the overall school readiness of economically disadvantaged children.

#### 1.1.1. Diverse learning opportunities

Human beings learn best when the body is engaged and events are registered by multiple senses (Sylwester, 1995). This may be particularly true for young children whose experience of the world is sensory in nature (Nutbrown, 2013). Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences has recognized the importance of varied modalities for processing information, as has the widely respected Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Accessibility theory suggests that a combination of verbal and nonverbal means for expressing knowledge may be particularly important for promoting the language development of students who are English language learners as well as children with the types of language delays common in poverty circumstances (Darby & Catterall, 1994; Eisner, 1998; Gregoire & Lupinetti, 2005).

Integrating the arts into preschool education may give young learners varied opportunities for engaging with school and experiencing success (Nevanen, Juvonen, & Ruismäki, 2014). Nevanen et al. (2014) gathered qualitative data from interviews with teachers and visiting artists in the Helsinki project, which involved multi-year collaborative projects in subjects like visual and environmental art, literature and drama, dance, circus art, and architecture. The researchers concluded that the varied opportunities for children to experience success increased their confidence and skill (Nevanen et al., 2014).

Additionally, the arts may enhance the cultural relevance of education for students from socioeconomic and ethnic groups whose cultures and traditions reside at the margins of standard U.S. education. Cultural relevance theory holds that the relevance of education depends on incorporating students' prior cultural knowledge, which for many students from African, Asian, Latin, and Indigenous American backgrounds includes expression through the arts (Boykin, 1991, 1992; Griffin & Miller, 2007; Young, 1990). Integrating the arts may facilitate building on students' prior cultural knowledge as well as allow students to express their individual realities, building bridges between home and school (Allison & Rehm, 2007; Bernhard, Winsler, Bleiker, Ginieniewicz, & Madigan, 2008; Hall, 2007).

#### 1.1.2. Social-emotional experiences that facilitate learning

Second, research suggests the arts may promote social-emotional experiences that facilitate learning, including for economically disadvantaged children (Menzer, 2015). In a prior investigation out of our lab, Brown and Sax (2013) found that children attending an arts-integrated Head Start showed greater

interest, happiness, and pride in music, dance, and visual arts classes compared with regular homeroom. These children also showed greater overall incidence of positive emotions compared with peers at a Head Start that was not fully arts-integrated, and showed significantly greater growth over the course of the school year in their ability to regulate or manage emotions.

An experimental study by Lobo and Winsler (2006) also demonstrated benefits of arts programming for economically disadvantaged children. In this study, children attending a Head Start preschool were randomly assigned to an eight-week dance program or a control group with free playtime. Those in the dance program showed greater growth in terms of social competence as well as internalizing and externalizing behavior as rated by parents and teachers who were not told children's group membership. These researchers noted the opportunities afforded by dance instruction for building self-confidence, social skills, and self-regulatory strategies.

Research with heterogeneous income samples has also demonstrated social-emotional benefits of multiple arts modalities. Multiple studies with children and young adults suggest that drawing can lead to short term mood improvement after the induction of negative mood (Dalebroux, Goldstein, & Winner, 2008; Drake & Winner, 2013). Research has suggested that acting classes may help children to develop empathy (Goldstein & Winner, 2012) and that complex sociodramatic play may enhance self-regulatory skills (Elias & Berk, 2002). Also, Winsler, Ducenne, and Koury (2011) documented an advantage in self-regulation for young children who participated in a music program compared with peers who did not participate and suggested that an increase in self-regulatory private speech might serve as one mechanism of this effect. The self-regulatory benefits of the arts may advantage children's overall acquisition of school readiness skills as well as their specific social-emotional skill development.

#### 1.1.3. Training of cognitive abilities

Arts training may provide a mechanism for training basic cognitive abilities that undergird school success. Schellenberg's (2005) review concluded that childhood music training generally enhances intellectual abilities. The conclusion was qualified in part because of a paucity of experimental studies. One experimental study by Schellenberg (2004) found that children participating in music lessons showed growth in IQ scores over the course of one year. Such growth could be explained by the influence of music training on executive functions such as planning, set-shifting, and inhibitory control; a hypothesis supported by some studies (Dege, Kubicek, & Schwarzer, 2011) but not all (Schellenberg, 2011). Sala and Gobet's (2017) review noted the lack of consistent findings of positive links between music training and IQ and concluded that many positive findings may be attributable to confounding variables.

Music, dance, and visual and dramatic art forms have also been proposed to train specific non-arts competencies due to the particular skill training embedded in arts programming. Visual arts, for example, might help students to engage with and learn about school readiness concepts related to texture and material and might train symbolic representation important for literacy development (Meiners, 2005). Creative writing and storytelling undoubtedly fosters literacy development (Bernhard et al., 2008). Additionally, robust research has linked music training to phonological awareness (Anvari, Trainor, Woodside, & Levy, 2002), visual-auditory learning (Moreno, Friesen, & Bialystok, 2011), and other language and literacy skills (Corrigan & Trainor, 2011; Forgeard, Winner, Norton, & Schlaug, 2008; Rauscher & Hinton, 2011). A neuroimaging study by Hyde et al. (2009) revealed structural brain changes that may underlie music training's links to auditory skills, and other evi-

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