

“When Would We Get Our Wiggles Out?”:

Children’s Arguments for Keeping Art, Music, and Physical Education in School

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Introduction

Art, music, and PE are considered “extras” in our schools. For most children in the US, the question of whether these classes should be part of the school day is salient. While children typically receive PE and arts classes (94% of elementary schools offer music and 83% offer art; Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012), they are also presented with messaging that these classes are on the brink of extinction (Richerme, 2011).

Because the existence of these classes is often threatened, a variety of justifications have been given for their retention. Some rationales are “intrinsic” (e.g., the joy associated with participation in the arts), while others are “extrinsic” (e.g., extra-curricular activities can help improve academic test scores; Winner, Goldstein & Vincent-Lacrin, 2013). This is the first study to investigate the thoughts of those who have the most to lose when art, music, or physical education is threatened -- the children. Here, we report the arguments given by United States 4th graders for keeping these classes in school, showing how they perceive the differential benefits of these classes.

Method

Participants

600 Grade 4 participants were randomly chosen from a sample of 2158 participants who were part of a larger investigation of habits of mind taught and learned in visual art. Forty-two schools across the US were recruited via the art teacher.

Measure

Children were randomly assigned to one of three groups and asked to write about art, music, or physical education class. Children were given 10 minutes to answer the following prompt:

Pretend that the people in charge at your school have decided that art [music/PE] class is not important, and that students will not have art [music/PE] class anymore. Is getting rid of art [music/PE] class a good idea or a bad idea? Say why, and give as many reasons as you can. Pretend you're trying to convince a friend who doesn't agree with you-- what will you say to make them change their mind? It's okay to write your answer in a paragraph, in a letter, or in a bulleted list.

Coding

A team of 5 researchers and the PI developed a coding manual using inductive approaches to fit the exploratory nature of this study.

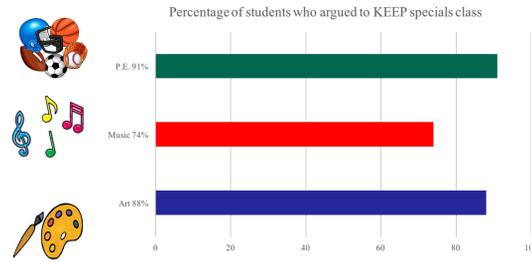
A set of 100 responses per discipline was randomly selected for manual creation. Beginning with art and then progressing to music and P.E., the PI open-coded responses (Anfara & Mangione, 2012) and presented a list of these codes to the research team. All researchers then used this list as basis for creation of a final thematic coding manual through consensual research methods (Hill, Thompson & Williams, 1997/2005), using the practice set of responses. The same manual was used for all three disciplines.

For final data coding, one coder was assigned to code each discipline. These coders underwent three training rounds of 40 responses each to measure inter-rater reliability. On the final round, a pooled Cohen's kappa was calculated using the coding platform Dedoose to measure agreement between the coder and the PI. These ranged from .81 to .85.

Each response was considered its own unit of analysis, and codes were tallied by discipline. Any code not seen in at least 10% of participants in any discipline was excluded from analysis.

Do Children Support These Classes?

Most children argued for keeping their assigned class in the school day.



However, a smaller percentage of children argued for supporting music class than art or P.E.

Chi square analysis revealed significant differences between these percentages for music and art (9.77, $p=.002$) and music and P.E. (21.47, $p<.000$). There was no significant difference between art and P.E. ($p<.05$).

What Reasons do Children Give?

Thematic analyses revealed 19 kinds of rationale – listed from most to least common (combined across art, music, and P.E.).

Emotional Investment	"Music is my passion" "I would be angry if they cut PE."
Technical Skill	"We learn to train our voices"
Physical Wellbeing	"We need to move around at school so we stay fit."
Emotional Wellbeing	"PE cheers me up." "Art class gives me a chance to be free."
Ubiquity	"Music is everywhere." "Knowing about art is part of our culture."
General Learning	"Music helps your brain." "We learn good habits in art class."
Preparedness	"If you don't take music now, you won't be able to play an instrument later." "Being good at a sport might help you get into college."
Opportunity	"This is the only place we have art supplies."
Creativity	"Art gives me a chance to use my imagination."
Collaboration	"You learn sportsmanship." "You get to work with your friends."
Expressive	"Music is where you show your feelings."
Concern for Teacher	"The art teacher would be fired and I like her."
Persistence	"If I practice my instrument, I get better."
Motivation	"I always want to come to school on art class day."
Agency	"I'm free to be me in art class."
Exploration	"I get to experiment with different tools."
Instrumental Justification	"We need a band for the football team." "Doing art helps your handwriting."
Sharing with Others	"My mom likes seeing my art."
Performance Skills	"We need to practice for the concert."

What are Children’s Most Frequently Used Arguments?

The top six responses for each class are listed below.

Three of the top six responses were the same for art, music, and PE:

- Emotional Investment
- Technical Skill
- Emotional Wellbeing

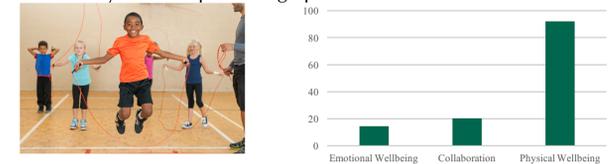
These three reasons are rationales for “specials,” (and possibly for other classes) and are not discipline-specific.

	Art	Music	P.E.
1	Emotional Investment	Technical Skill	Physical Wellbeing
2	Technical Skill	Emotional Investment	Emotional Investment
3	Creativity	Preparedness	Technical Skill
4	Ubiquity	Ubiquity	Emotional Wellbeing
5	Expression	General Learning	Collaboration
6	Emotional Wellbeing	Emotional Wellbeing	Opportunity

P.E. Specific Responses

Are there rationales unique to PE?

To find out, for each each code, we subtracted the percentage given for PE from the percentage given for music and art combined. Codes that differed by over 10 percentage points are shown below.



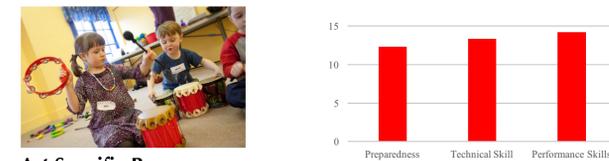
PE specific rationales refer to **wellness**: emotional and physical wellbeing and collaboration (a part of social wellbeing).

Visual Art vs. Music

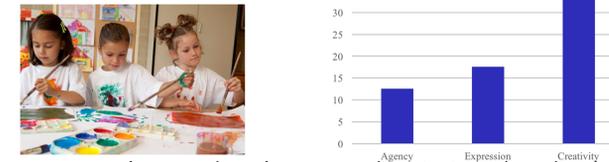
Are there rationales unique to art and unique to music?

To find out, for each code we subtracted the percentage given for music from the percentage given for art. Codes that differed the most (by over 10 percentage points) are shown below.

Music Specific Responses



Art Specific Responses



Music specific rationales refer to musical **content** – technical and performing skills, and being prepared to undertake future musical study.

Visual art specific rationales reference permission to exert **personal control** via feeling agentic, showing creativity, or personal voice (expression).

Conclusions and Future Directions

Children’s unschooled intuitions about the benefits of art, music and PE seem strikingly perceptive. They value art for expression, agency, and creativity. They value music for skill building. They value PE for wellbeing.

A Wake Up Call for Music Educators

These findings are an important wake up call for music educators. Children were significantly less likely to argue for keeping music than art or PE. Why? Perhaps because they perceive music classes to focus on skill building rather than creativity, expression, or other personally meaningful values. Rarely did children justify music class in terms of personal agency (as for visual art) or wellbeing (as for PE). These findings should provide fuel for calls from music educators to make the field less hierarchical and more democratic in order to give students more voice and more choice (Allsup, 2012; Regelski, 2013).

Emotional Wellbeing

The justification that these classes provide emotional wellbeing was among the top six arguments given for all three kinds of classes: the classes provide a “break” from academics, they help them feel happier or calmer, they free their minds. While it is encouraging that children recognize the emotional value of these classes, these kinds of responses may also mean that children perceive these classes to lack rigor. The fact that so little time is granted to these classes may also lead to the view that these classes are not as serious as “academic” classes.

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