

The Arts Helped Shape Me

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Endeavor STEM Teaching Certificate Project

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My earliest recollections of art bring up pleasant memories for me. I was shy, timid child and I was able to express myself through creating with my hands or through movement. When I was on a stage or with a paintbrush in my hand, I believe the arts helped shape who I am today.

An early memory of my experiences in the arts was when I lived in Germany on an Air Force Base where I attended an “open school” popular in the 1970s. At this school, there was no schedule, no whole-class lessons, no uniforms, no standardized testing. Classrooms were multi-aged and teachers were called by their first names. The children made up the rules and decided what they wanted to learn. I often spent most of the day in art with my favorite teacher, Noel. We made weavings, finger paintings, batiks, mosaics, ceramics, sand art, and all the wonderful art from the 1970s. We often cooked our own lunches and ate organic, vegan meals from produce grown in the school garden. While I did not spend much time studying math, multiplication facts were taught through singing and movement. We did not have desks, but instead had flexible seating on couches, bean bag chairs or could sit up in a loft. Students wrote plays, designed costumes and sets, and then performed on a stage made by stringing up sheets outside under a tree. So much of my day at school involved being creative and exploring the arts and I loved going to school. When we moved back to the states and I attended a traditional school, I missed the positive, nurturing, and stimulating environment of the open school.

Outside of school, my exposure to the arts was through dance. I was a quiet, self-conscious girl who did not like to be the center of attention and had a fear of public speaking. My mother had always wanted to become a ballerina and wanted me, her only girl, to be one. She enrolled me into ballet classes at six years old. I performed The Nutcracker, Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty many times throughout the years. Ballet required so much dedication and practice, and I resented

it at times, but I wanted to please my mother. I am glad I did, as I blossomed and became confident, self-assured and overcame my fear of public speaking. I continued through high school and was on a dance team in college, getting over my fear of public speaking. This dance experience led to my teaching exercise classes at health clubs and then to the yoga classes that I lead today.

As I reflect on my experiences in the arts, I realize that the arts increased my self-confidence as a child at an impressionable time in my life. As a result, I try to recreate as much of the “open school” concept as I can in my classroom by encouraging learning through creativity and movement. I have a traditional classroom with desks, but often have students sit in groups and I allow students to sit on the floor with blankets and pillows. My students learn their multiplication facts through music and movement. Students enjoy participating in Reader’s Theater, often dressing up or creating costumes. Recently, my third graders have created Google Slide presentations. Many of my struggling writers have become motivated and learned to add music, art and video to enhance their presentations. Despite my own experience as a student in school, I find it challenging to teach visual arts such as drawing, painting and sculpting because of a lack of supplies and space. Currently, my school site does not have an art specialist so I am often looking for ideas and ways to enhance my lessons with art activities. Through this course, I am looking forward to learning how to integrate art into science technology and math so my students can benefit from the arts, as I did.

My definition of art is how one shares their emotions, feelings, and thoughts through music, drama, dance, writing or visual arts. I am grateful that I was able to experience learning in this way and I believe it made me a more well-rounded student and person. Unfortunately, education has been in a “back to basics” mode for many years and the arts have been pushed aside as

teachers feel they do not have time or the talent to teach the arts. Through the arts, however, students can be active in their learning rather than passively listening to the teacher. They can create a unique learning experience, different from what I had, but similar in that art encourages them to compare, contrast and analysis. This program offers insight into how to combine science and art. So, while our classroom focus is on the basics of learning, teaching the basics through art may produce a more enriching experience for my students. The concepts and standards of Common Core include collaboration, independent, student-centered learning, and exploration, all of which the arts can provide for our students. As Lutfi and Reppas (2006) stated, "Fine arts require higher order thinking skills, individual and group efforts, and an atmosphere of controlled freedom that teaches responsibility" (p. 25). I believe that through art, my students can find a fuller learning experience as I did and as I continue to do today.

Reference

Respress, T., & Lutfi, G. (2006). Whole brain learning: The fine arts with students at risk. *Reclaiming Children & Youth, 15*(1), 24-31.