

## **The Value of Arts Education: How Do We Measure Success in American Society?**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In an era when public schools are expected to focus largely on testing and statistical measurements to validate success, the value of arts education has once again been called into question. In the political atmosphere of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislative mandate, many schools have chosen to cut the arts out of the curriculum, and deem the subjects of reading, writing, and arithmetic as the most indicative measures of student success. But what quantitative test can ever measure the impact of the arts, and, in particular, music, on the development of a child? We are getting better at finding out the answers, as several scientific studies have found that arts education actually raises the academic performance level of students as well as enhances affective domain outcomes. (Deasy iv)

In one such study, published in 1999, researchers from Columbia University Teachers College found that “young people in ‘high-arts’ groups performed better than those in ‘low-arts’ groups on measures of creativity, fluency, originality, elaboration, and resistance to closure ... pupils in arts-intensive settings were also strong in their abilities to express thoughts and ideas, exercise their imaginations and take risks in learning” (Burton, Horowitz, and Abeles 36). Students immersed in an arts-rich curriculum demonstrated “the ability to explore myriad ideas, envision and try out unusual and personal responses, consider objects, ideas, and experiences in detail, and be willing to keep thoughts open long enough to take imaginative leaps” (38). In concluding comments, the authors of this study argue that “schools interested in nurturing complex minds should provide a critical mass of arts instruction over the duration of young peoples’ school lives.” The arts “need to become curriculum partners with other subject disciplines in ways that will allow them to contribute their own distinctive richness and complexity to the learning process as a whole” (45).

Without the world of music, dance, visual art, and drama, we may not have found a positive means of expression. As children we found solace in music and joy in dance; solved problems with a chunk of clay or paintbrush; and gained self-confidence with drama. Struggling to grow up, ignored or rejected or tormented, there would always be the arts. If we had parents who believed in a well-rounded education, they struggled also to provide piano lessons, dance instruction, or experiences in the theatre. From these personal experiences, we learned how important it is to express our deep inner feelings through the arts.

I still remember the solo I had to sing in front of the entire PTA audience when I was in the first grade:

*An oriole sits on her cradle nest,  
And swings and swings and swings.  
She sits on the edge of her cradle nest,  
And sings and sings and sings...*

I had no anxiety about singing the song, but when I had to talk to the audience, I was petrified. My music teacher, whose name I'll never recall, whispered in my ear, prompting me to conclude: "When the notes go up, our voices go up; when the notes go down, our voices go down." I said the words that she wanted me to say, but I was mixed up. I didn't understand what those words meant at the time. Now it is clear that it is simply a matter of logic. That is what the Western notational system of music is all about. But, of course, music is much more than that. When I heard the applause, I knew that this was fun; I had a gift; and, what's more, I could get a lot of attention this way.

In the recent past, American society has been concerned about the issue of "family values," the portrayal of sex, violence, and drugs in the media, and the allegedly negative influence of certain types of music on our children. The commercialization of music in almost every genre has changed its role and value in our American culture. In a nation that values capitalism, the arts have been cut from many public schools in favor of focusing on academics in order to prepare students for the workforce. Instead of supporting the arts education of our children and teaching sensitivity, creativity, and positive means of expression, our government expects educators to produce students to pass a given academic test. There is no doubt that we need a nation of competent workers to fuel our capitalistic society, but if we are to survive as a nation, we also need a nation of creative thinkers and sensitive, tolerant human beings.

As a result of diminishing arts education in the schools, some forms of music, dance, and art have emerged in the United States that represent negative lifestyles. These forms have not only inundated pop culture, but seem to have influenced the behavior, attitudes, and viewpoints of some American youth. Therein lies the danger: without a broad educational perspective, students lack the ability to make judgments. There is contrary opinion about the negative impact of this alleged "hedonistic" lifestyle, as addressed in a recent *New York Times* Op-Ed column by David Brooks:

As the entertainment media have become more sex-saturated, American teenagers have become more sexually abstemious. . .when you actually look at the intimate life of America's youth, you find this heterodoxical pattern: people can seem raunchy on the surface but are wholesome within. . .what matters is reality.

Mr. Brooks points out that the current state of American popular culture does not necessarily poorly influence our youth. He assumes a "just lie back and enjoy the optimism" attitude about the current state of affairs. As educators, we cannot afford to take that attitude. We must ask ourselves exactly what is the student learning in the absence of arts education?

In our present political climate, when jobs and money are on the line to produce favorable test scores, our students today are being denied their rights to a complete education. They are deprived of what makes them fully human. As professional educators, we shun our responsibility to reach the "whole child," in favor of producing immediate results on a test designed to measure "performance." While it is important that we assess our progress in academic skills, there is no "whole child" who should have to sit still at his or her desk every day for a minimum of five hours, struggling with worksheets, exercises, and practice test after practice test. What "whole

child" learns to internalize creative thinking and solve problems by using only a pencil, a piece of paper, and his or her minimal life experiences?

Art experiences, interactions with others, time for discovery, and pride in being creative have been stripped from our educational system. We might as well go back to the beginning of the 20th century when the purpose of educating the masses was to prepare them for a life in the factory. To those who would insist that we "get back to the basics," I would insist that the arts *are* basic--as basic to the human experience as any other discipline of knowledge. Over the course of history, the arts have stretched our inner worlds of imagination, and at the same time have strengthened our overall intelligence by mapping essential neural pathways of reasoning and creative expression.

Howard Gardner of Project Zero, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, says it this way:

The arts are a major area of human cognition, one of the ways in which we know about the world and express our knowledge. Much of what is said in the arts cannot be said in another way. To withhold artistic means of understanding is as much of a malpractice as to withhold mathematics. (Tarchalski, quotes from *U. S. News and World Report*)

How did we ever abandon the arts? By allowing those who do not know the essential nature of the arts to assume positions of power and make uninformed decisions. Those who cut out the arts programs from their budgets either do not know, choose to ignore the fact that the arts express what cannot be expressed in any other way, or have bowed to the forces that dictate the arts are a "frill." But, we can no longer ignore the overwhelming research being done that verifies the link between the arts and intellectual development. The Early Greeks had it absolutely correct. In their educational system, music and other art forms were *core* subjects, with all other subjects of knowledge tied to the absolute value of the arts.

In a study of many cultures throughout the world, Colwyn Trevathen and Stephen Malloch (University of Edinburgh) have concluded that music is a "universal language." What they call "motherese," the singsong communication between mother and baby, "provides the baby with a framework for language and 'teaches the baby how to become a human being'" (Mistiaen 1D).

In a study done by researchers at the University of California, Irvine, and the University of Wisconsin, a group of preschoolers given piano lessons increased spatial reasoning by thirty-four percent after six months of training. This group was compared to a group who received computer training and one who received no special training at all. "These children have plastic (malleable) brains that are just forming connections," said psychologist Frances H. Rauscher. "We're influencing pattern development in the cortex through neural training" (Maugh 7A).

Instead of hiring new reading teachers, our focus should be on implementing arts programs, correlated with cognitive development, which will directly prepare the preschool and primary-aged child with the experiences that will lead to the development of disciplined and logical thinking patterns. Eventually, this sequential approach would foster the mastery of academic skills in elementary school. For example, in a Greenwood, Mississippi study, Stanford Achievement Test scores were raised between five and twelve percentiles after two semesters of piano lessons (Tarchalski). By high school, SAT scores increased thirty-four percent in verbal and eighteen percent in math after students had completed four years of study in music and other fine arts programs (Tarchalski from *U. S. News and World Report*).

As more and more arts programs are being cut from school budgets, the test scores of our students continue to show a downward trend. Schools are now implementing after school tutorial sessions to drill students who are falling behind. Even so, it is doubtful that these methods of test preparation will have any lasting value for our society as a whole. Many of our academic

programs across the country have failed miserably, as have most of the “No Child Left Behind” strategies. Shouldn't this fact show that something is missing in the child's education? There *are* solutions, if we are willing to listen. With the passage of the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, the arts are written into federal law. The law acknowledges that the arts are a core subject, as important to education as English, mathematics, history, civics and government, geography, science, and foreign language (Consortium of National Arts Education Association).

The arts benefit all populations of Americans because they are based on experience, linking that kind of "knowing" with a traditional linear approach to learning. Among many other things, the arts provide knowledge about an increasingly diverse and technological world as "students learn to identify, appreciate, and participate in the traditional art forms of their own communities" (Consortium of National Arts Education Association).

## **ACADEMIC SETTING AND CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of this curriculum unit will be to develop cross-curricular music, art, and dance lessons that will enhance the depth and complexity of children's learning. Based on the premise that music education is a vital component of any school curriculum, this unit will help students make the necessary connections between music and academic disciplines. It will heighten awareness of ways that music nurtures expression of cultural values, and, finally, it will show ways that the arts in American society are essential to the full development of an individual.

I teach music at T.H. Rogers Alternative School in Houston and work with gifted and talented K-8 students, as well as deaf and multi-impaired students from pre-kindergarten through grade twelve. All of the populations at my school have diverse needs and capabilities, so to make connections between the arts and academics, one of my goals will be to collaborate with classroom teachers by designing musical activities that will enhance academic objectives for their students.

In order to understand expression of cultural values in the United States, we will compare three selected examples examining their inherent similarities and differences: Native American culture, Appalachian folk communities, and the current culture of Hip-Hop. We will examine the characteristics, discuss the intrinsic values, and determine the purpose of music, art, drama, and dance represented by these three cultures. It is important to understand how music, art, drama, and dance represent the full value of expression (cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains) within a given culture and how they reflect “culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium” (Anderson, *Calliope's Sisters* 277).

As we study the music, art, drama, and dance of these cultures, students will keep a notebook of their experiences with them. They will reflect in a journal about how art represents aspects of each culture. In an effort to show how music is a vital part of our human nature and imperative for our success as a society, we will write a musical play about how lives would be different without music, art, drama, and dance. We will include elements of various cultures as examples of how the arts have played a vital role in societies, imagining life without the presence of them.

To better understand the question about the purpose of arts in society, we will learn about what other societies have done. We will learn about the human need to perpetuate tradition and cultural values at the most basic levels, expressed in the indigenous peoples of North America, Appalachian Folk culture, and the “Hip-Hop Generation.” We will examine educational philosopher John Dewey's claim that “art is the universal language,” and that “art is a product of culture, and it is through art that people of a given culture express the significance of their lives, as well as their hopes and ideals” (Field 18). We will delve into Dewey's theory of pragmatism and consider its application to our present society, particularly in the Hip-Hop culture. “For Dewey, the essence and value of art is not in (such) artifacts but in the dynamic and developing

experiential activity through which they are created and perceived” (Shusterman, “John Dewey” 8).

Regardless of whether or not we subscribe to art as an ideal form, as the expression of human feeling, or as a symbolic gesture of the society in which we live, it is evident that diverse cultures of the world have applied art in historically different contexts. “In an era of political turmoil and complex negotiations of personal identity, even artists from within a nation, people, or culture may face difficulties in assessing meaning and value in art...while recognizing that communities are diverse and evolving, we can still say that John Dewey’s idea makes sense, that art ‘expresses the life of a community’” (Freeland 86-87). “Both the expression and cognitive theories of art hold that art *communicates*: it can communicate feelings and emotions, or thoughts and ideas. Interpretation is important because it helps explain how art does this. Art acquires meaning in part from its context” (149). Therefore, we will examine the context in which art is expressed in this curriculum unit. We will subsequently apply our own understanding of the value of art in our society, in context of culture, to the process of developing our original musical play. Through this process, and as a probable outcome, the students will create their own definition of success in American society.

## **NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE**

### **Cultural Perspectives of Native American Music, Art, Drama, and Dance**

Typically, Native American and indigenous Canadian cultures view music as a spiritual gift coming to them from visions or dreams. While Western Civilization art holds the “experts” in high esteem and honors the individual artist, the purpose of art for indigenous peoples of the Americas is to honor ancestors, the supernatural, nature, and daily life in a ritualistic way. Traditionally, there are no superstars. As a supernatural power, music is communication with the gods. “Music is a significant part of storytelling, dance, ceremony, hunting, fishing, and food preparation, and it is closely integrated in the daily and occasional ceremonial life experiences” (Anderson and Campbell 34-35). Instruments are fashioned from natural objects. Native Americans use drums, rattles, flutes, and most importantly, the voice to transmit spiritual awareness and community cohesiveness.

In traditional Native American culture, there seems to be a song for every occasion. Some examples include the “Peyote Drinking Song,” “Zuni Sunset Song” (Buttree), “Do Not Fear the Horse,” and “Dance of the Turkeys.” (De Cesare 4-5) The songs have a limited vocal range, are sung as a solo or in unison, and use very few instruments as an accompaniment. Most of these songs tell a story, describe an event as an instructional device, or are useful in daily life.

In addition to the songs, the comprehensive value of dance; visual art, including costumes, pottery, and other crafts; and dramatic arts provide an *inclusionary* means of expression in Native American daily rituals and ceremonies. In particular, dance demonstrates a viable means of expressing historical and cultural awareness as it perpetuates the lifeblood of the community in ways that are unique to the Native American. In most Western Civilization art circles, products are the result of “masters” and consequently are *exclusionary* of most members of the society.

It is difficult for us to realize how much dancing meant to the Red Men. It figured in all their social and athletic life. The dance was a great public opportunity to either tell in pantomime historical facts or interpret ideas. The vital things of their everyday life, as well as their dramatic adventures, were presented at the Council Ring through the dance. The chase, the things connected with their religion, love and hate, and peace and war were all set forth to music and movement at the Council Fire (Seton 1).

The importance of dancing is expressed by poetess Mary Austin as quoted from *The American Rhythm*:

(I have) seen the Red Man dancing  
To sustain the World Throb penned  
Alive between his ribs,  
Not like a ballerina's, in her toes,  
But next to where life is,  
Heart, breath, and bowels of him; moved  
With the desire to make the world work well with God. (Buttree 1)

Pueblo pottery is one of the best examples of a preserved craft among Native American cultures. The original methods of harvesting special clays, decorating, and firing the pots in an outdoor bonfire are still practiced in the Pueblo culture. It has been vitally important that the traditions and rituals were kept within the confines of the society. Now, through the influx of Euroamerican tourists, the Pueblo women potters have begun to receive recognition as artists and are thus compensated for their work. Once viewed as strictly utilitarian and ceremonial objects, the pottery of the Pueblo has now enjoyed recognition as “art” and has provided a way to sustain life for the community (Peterson 5-6).

It is clay work that provides a way for Indian women to express themselves. Pottery plays a crucial role in tribal rituals and ceremonies; the physical handling of the pots provides emotional and spiritual awareness ... the work of their hands is always in evidence. (Peterson 3)

There are significant efforts to preserve the pottery objects, along with the symbolic and ritualistic traditions of the culture. From the process, “these ideas and emotions fulfill endless human needs—to connect to the raw materials of the earth, to respect and honor ancestral tradition, and to experience the continuity of life and spirit. We must understand the legacy of what the work stood for and is—an all-encompassing expression of the best that is human” (Peterson 4-5).

An important Zuni art practice manifests itself in the totem animal fetishes carved out of stone and carried around the neck in a small bag. These miniature sculptures, sometimes representing the transformation of a person into an animal, are connected to the spiritual realm, signifying protection and oneness with nature (Freeland, Personal Interview). After the students examine various art objects in the Native American cultures, they will design their own sculpture depicting their human personality and the transformation of that personality into an animal of their choice. Once completed, each student will create a legend about their work and share it with the class.

### **Preserving the Art of Inuit Throat-Singing**

Another example of cultural preservation and expression through the arts comes from the indigenous people of North America. In modern Inuit culture, throat-singing is once again making a comeback after having a history of imposed banishment by European Christian priests. In addition to regular singing, sometimes accompanied by drums and dancing, the technique of throat-singing is generally practiced by two women facing each other in close proximity. Vocalization resonates from one to the other as one imitates the other in a kind of game.

Inuit throat-singing is done the following way: two women face each other; they may be standing or crouching down; one is leading, while the other responds; the leader produces a short rhythmic motif, that she repeats with a short silent gap in-between, while the other fills in the gaps...the first to run out of breath or be unable to maintain the pace of

the other singer will start to laugh or simply stop and will thus lose the game. (Deschenes 3-4)

Evie Mark is a throat-singer in the current Inuit community who explains the purpose and traditions of her art. She believes that “throat-singing is such a strong tradition that it probably didn’t want to die.” (Deschenes 9) She stands strongly for her people and her traditions, explaining that her art goes back to times when the hunter men were absent from the village and the women kept going with this way of entertainment and socialization. The sounds produced in the throat-singing have little literal meaning. Sometimes they mimic animals and birds. They may imitate sounds of natural elements like the wind and water. In some communities, they can tell a story, but more often than not, they are improvised sounds. (Deschenes 4-10) For further exploration of throat-singing practices, we will view a videotape by Jeremy Marre, *The Nature of Music: Part One*, that offers a demonstration of this activity.

### ***Rituals of Drum Dancing***

No one knows the exact beginning of music in time, but in human memory, the drum has been a prominent feature of indigenous cultures. For the Inuit people, what is called “drum dancing” serves the dual purpose of feeling the rhythm through movement and providing accompaniment for story songs about spirits. The artistic craft of drum making from caribou skin and wood contributes to the important nature of this activity. (Canadian Arctic Profiles 1)

One of the activities that the students will participate in will be drum dancing. From this experience, the students will develop a real sense of how the creative process may start. Each student will write a short story about a nature event. In small groups, one person will tell the story and drum playing will be added to emphasize the rhythm of the words, the sounds of nature, or to emphasize certain emotions felt in the story. The drum accompaniment will be largely improvised. As the story is told a second time, it will be acted out or danced. Drum dancing’s universal simplicity allows expression that will contribute to understanding indigenous cultures and help to illustrate the psychomotor, cognitive, and affective domains involved in artistic activity.

Richard Anderson’s assessment of Navajo aesthetics in *Calliope’s Sisters*, summarizes the strength and adaptability of a culture through its musical practices: “Making music is a serious matter for Navajos, an activity that can make a sick patient well again or help a country win a war. In all cases, music restores the health, harmony, and goodness that the world is potentially heir to” (125).

## **APPALACHIAN FOLK MUSIC**

### **Cultural Perspectives of Appalachian Traditional Music**

Geological formation of the Appalachians and the Scottish Highlands share a geological history. Some 500 million years ago, these mountain ranges were the same. After the Atlantic Ocean separated them, these mountain ranges retained many of the same geological characteristics. It is interesting to note that when settlers from the British Isles landed in America, they made their way to the Appalachian mountain region. The music of the Appalachians is based on folk ballads and dance tunes, passed from one generation to the next, usually by the women.

The music expressed many stories of struggles, work, personal situations, spiritual, and legendary tales. Usually unaccompanied, the nasal voice quality was typical of the Celtic ballad sound. Instruments were added like the fiddle and the banjo, and much later, the guitar. The Anglo-Celtic sound was modified and enriched by the African American traditions that were brought to the region. Music and dance served as entertainment for these isolated populations,

and the heritage of story telling through song was maintained. The arts and crafts were both practical and aesthetically pleasing (McClatchy 1-3).

There are numerous musical examples to choose from, but two that have maintained their popularity are “The Riddle Song” and “Mr. Frog Went a-Courtin’.” Complete lesson plans for these two songs may be found in *Multicultural Perspectives in Music Education* (Anderson and Campbell 17-22). To bring this folk music up to date for the students, we will read Kevin O’Malley’s story *Froggy Went A-Courtin’*, a new adaptation of “Mr. Frog Went a-Courtin’”. In this version, Mr. Froggy is a gangster and Miss Mousie is a nightclub owner. To add to the fun, we will add our own rap music with various instruments to represent each character in the story, create dance steps, and fashion appropriate costumes, being careful not to glorify Mr. Froggie as a gangster, but to understand his character in context of the story. There have always been literary examples of both good and evil; many times there are not clear delineations of these two entities. By comparing the two versions of this story, students will understand how each culture may view characters and adapt them to their own experiences. By doing so, students will be able to articulate how cultural values may be reflected in the art of the community.

### ***The Power of Story-telling***

The power of the above story about “Mr. Frog Went a-Courtin’” is evident in its ability to transform itself from one generation to the next and become adapted in the rich traditions of its people. Not only does the traditional story stay alive, but it morphs into another version by means of a cross-cultural transformation. In the section about the Hip-Hop generation, we will look at other ways that stories of the culture are told and legends are made that represent additional new expressions.

### **The Folk Art of Doll Making**

Doll making has been an expressive and functional folk art in the Appalachian community for many generations. There are two important points about this craft that should be emphasized: dolls were made from materials that were readily available, teaching survival and resourcefulness as a traditional part of the culture. Examples of materials used include pinecones, cornhusks, homespun cloth, scraps of material, acorns, corncobs, and whittled pieces of wood; the other point is that, as the Appalachian regions became more accessible to others, the community was able to turn the folk art into a means of livelihood. The true value of the craft remains in its original traditions, however, even as the product has become more marketable (Burke 1-2).

In collaboration with Annie Foley, who is an expert doll maker and a teacher of the multiply impaired at my school, the students will design and make their own cornhusk dolls in the tradition of the Appalachian artists. Our students will learn how to gather simple, natural materials and recycle scraps of material. They will draft a design, and put together the cornhusk form following a sequential pattern. Directions for this part of the project may be found within the Burke article cited below. As individual artistry varies, the students will make a doll that represents what is “beautiful” to them. We will talk about the folklore surrounding the cornhusk doll. “Legend has it that an Indian princess saw and admired her image in a reflection of water and, as punishment for her narcissism, had her face taken away. The legend lives on in the faceless cornhusk doll” (Burke 1).

## **THE HIP HOP GENERATION**

### **Reflecting Street Life**

Some of the most expressive art in American society today comes from the Hip-Hop culture. Not only does this culture use music for its message, but it also uses commercial enterprise to permeate the very fabric of a current generation through “attitude,” fashion, body art, personal



adornments, media, dance, and graffiti art. On first glance, Hip-Hop culture may be viewed as *expressionist*, that is, representing the artist's emotions, but upon further study, it may also be viewed as belonging to the *instrumentalist theory* of art. According to Richard Anderson's assessment of philosophies of art, "*instrumental theories* emphasize the functional capacity of art, requiring art to make some sort of positive contribution to the well-being of individuals or society. . . political art is also instrumental." (Anderson, *Calliope's Sisters* 234) Some may question Hip-Hop's positive contribution, but its political impact cannot be denied. In her book *Rap Music and Street Consciousness*, Cheryl L. Keyes argues that the nature of rap music must be viewed in context of urban street culture:

Perhaps those who are ambivalent about or critical of rap music can move beyond essentializing it as a decadent form and, more importantly, come to realize that rap music is not an aberration of black culture but rather a part of a continuum of black expressive culture and an art form that has made an indelible entry into American history." (5)

As the musical genre of rap emerged in the 1960s, the purpose of rap became clear through the Black Arts Movement (BAM). Leroy Jones, a.k.a. Imamu Amiri Baraka, talks about the mission of BAM that was threefold. The African-American artists wanted to create their own art and poetry that represented them as a minority group, could reach the urban street masses, and would be revolutionary. As the rap style became popular, the artistic efforts were appreciated for their ability to speak to the issues of African American people (Keyes 32-33).

From a musical standpoint, the evolution of the rap style is based on rhymed couplets that come together in a poetic "flow." The sounds of the words are most important, and new words may be invented or slightly varied to fit the pattern of the rhythm or rhyme. Another important aspect of the rap style is called *signification* or "*signifyin*." This artistic practice exploits metaphor, allusions, and imagery to create meaning. Through this process, words have new meaning or even multiple layers of meaning, understood only if the listener has knowledge of street culture vocabulary (Keyes 131-132). Timbre and texture of the rap genre are also essential elements to its unique quality. For example, ethnomusicologist Portia K. Maultsby states that "musicians bring intensity to their performance by alternating lyrical, percussive, and raspy timbres; juxtaposing vocal and instrumental textures; changing pitch and dynamic levels; alternating straight with vibrato tones; and weaving moans, shouts, grunts, hollers, and screams into the melody" (Keyes 145).

### **The Political Power of Hip-Hop**

Most of us know Hip-Hop style through its commercial image, its effect on the public through the mass media market, and its ability to mesmerize our students. Viewed as an art form, with the added dimensions of fashion and dramatic flare, it has far surpassed its original aesthetic value goal set in the 1960s by the Black Arts Movement. Cheryl Keyes summarizes as follows:

The effectiveness of a performance involves careful execution of flow, timing, rhetorical devices, soundtrack mix, sound quality, and paramusicalingual features. Through these combined components, rap unfolds as a complex form that is rooted in a street aesthetic in which rawness, realness, ingenuity, and, above all, style are essential. It has permeated the cultural mainstream in its own aesthetic terms while simultaneously giving voice to a disenfranchised segment of urban America. (153)

As it has evolved, some rap music now connotes a certain negative lifestyle, associated with the "gansta" mentality. This negative influence has become so troubling for segments of the population that a conference was called by the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture (CSRPC) at the University of Chicago in April 2005. In its description of the problem CSRPC states that there is "some research warning of the possible negative impact of hip hop culture on

young African Americans, stemming from its focus and promotion of sex, drugs, crime, misogyny, consumerism, and nihilism. It has been argued by commentators and casual observers that the imagery and lyrics of popular rap music and videos normalizes or even promotes the degradation of women, especially Black women" (CSRPC 1).

It is important to separate those negative rap and "slammin'" influences from the more uplifting Hip-Hop culture, which celebrates a positive image through music, dance, fashion, and community art. When we examine Hip-Hop as an art form, as with any art form, it is important to teach our students how to evaluate it. We can appreciate its musical and artistic qualities even though its specific content at times is controversial. At the middle school level, we will examine why Hip-Hop is so prevalent in today's society and debate the value of its impact. In its infancy, rap came from the streets of African-American neighborhoods. Now, as crass and commercial as it sometimes seems, Hip-Hop represents many diverse, disenfranchised communities of our nation, and as Richard Anderson defines art, it carries "culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium." (Anderson, *Calliope's Sisters* 277) For further discussion of Hip-Hop culture, please refer to "Hip-Hop Influence on Art and Society," a curriculum unit developed by my colleague, Monica Jackson, as part of the Arts and Society Seminar. This unit appears in this collection and can be downloaded from Houston Teachers Institute's website ([www.uh.uh.edu/hti](http://www.uh.uh.edu/hti)).

As Hip-Hop reaches into the American mainstream, the cross-fertilization of cultures is evident in the fact that Native Americans are expressing themselves through rap music in our modern culture, as well as through many other mainstream genres. At the 2003 Sixth Annual Native American Music Awards, for example, categories for excellence in music included Best Rap/Hip Hop Recording, Best Blues/Jazz Recording, Best Folk/Country Recording, Flutist of the Year, and Gospel/Christian Recording. Other categories included Best Historical Recording, Best New Age Recording, Best Pop/Rock Recording, Best Pow Wow Recording, Best Spoken Word Recording, Best Traditional Recording, Native Heart, and Best World Music Recording. (*Sixth Annual Native American Music Awards* 4-7)

## **LESSONS IN CREATIVITY**

### **Lesson One**

Our introduction to contrasting cultures will begin with an experience in the Inuit custom of drum dancing. Pictures of drum dancing and a videotape recording entitled *The Nature of Music* will provide information about the Inuit people and their artistic practices.

In music class, students will participate in activities that seek to duplicate an authentic drum circle experience. In addition, sample images of artwork will show that nature is an important subject for design in pottery and sculpture. Given sculpting materials, the students will shape their renditions of various animals and birds found in the Arctic region and in Alaska. For younger students, animals that are more familiar to them will be chosen. After an animal has been selected, students will transform their own sculpture by imposing their human personality into that of their animal. Once completed, each student will create a legend about his or her work and share it with the class. During this presentation, each student will pose as a human sculpture. This physical imitation of form, based on the shape and texture of each sculpture, will provide a kinesthetic dimension to the project.

### ***Materials***

Videotape recording entitled *The Nature of Music*

Large hand drum, small hand drum

Inuit sculptures or photos of Inuit sculpture depicting a bird or animal in the Arctic region

Modeling Clay

## ***Objectives***

Our first musical objective is to keep a steady rhythm throughout the activity. As students express personal stories by inventing musical accompaniment, they will simultaneously improvise memorable rhythms to fit the words of the stories. As skills are acquired, there will be cohesiveness reached as a “community” and a common experience felt that will be preserved through drum dancing. The visual art experience should allow students to feel “as one” with their materials as they shape the clay with their hands. A connection will be made with literature, social studies, and environmental science as students write their personal story.

## ***Activity One***

Students will preview Inuit culture with the above mentioned videotape. After seeing the segment on throat-singing, students will discuss the contrast between our modern society and that of the Native Americans. Some students will want to try the throat-singing, but the main focus of this lesson will be drum dancing. All students and the teacher will sit in a circle; the teacher will keep a steady beat with the large hand drum and each student will introduce himself by tapping a small hand drum to syllables in his name. On the next go around, the student will embellish his name by telling an important fact about himself. Under the teacher’s guidance, the drum will be used to accent and play out the rhythm of the words.

After this activity, the students will form small groups of four or five to pantomime activities that they like to do, such as playing basketball, swimming, or reading a book. These creative movements will be combined to make a dance telling the story of its participants, accompanied by the repetition of drum rhythms. When each group has performed, we will compare and contrast the results and show how an “Indian” name might be invented based on characteristics of personality, personal history, or personal preferences. We will discuss how this “history” might be preserved for further generations in the form of drum dancing.

## ***Activity Two***

With the assistance of the visual arts or classroom teacher, students will transform clay into unique totem animal fetishes. During this lesson we will explore ways that animals may become symbols and how the identification of unique animal traits may be represented in human forms. There will be an opportunity to compare the Inuit beliefs about animal symbols with Greek Mythological figures. We will choose animals that are familiar to children in their every day environment, such as birds, squirrels, cats, dogs, horses, turtles, fish, and pigs. These art objects will depict certain personality traits of their designer and serve as inspiration for the creative writing of an original legend.

## ***Evaluation***

Once completed, the student will share his original art work with the class, display it in a school hallway, and then take it home to share with family. A personal journal will tell the student’s process throughout the activities. Further lessons will be developed, emphasizing rhythm patterns, movement, style, and expression of language through music.

## **Lesson Two**

### ***Materials***

Cornhusk doll components: softened cornhusks, string, and miscellaneous scraps and natural objects

Audio recordings or downloaded samples of Appalachian folksongs

Copy of the song and story “Mr. Frog Went A-Courtin”

### ***Objective***

Our primary objective will be to experience the nature of community by duplicating the setting of Appalachian mountain village activity. Students will learn traits of a folksong as it is passed from one generation to the next. To demonstrate how a folksong or story might change over time, the students will participate in singing two styles of the same song. Students will also be able to dramatize a story using their own cornhusk dolls as the characters.

### ***Activity One***

For this activity, we will create an atmosphere of traditional Appalachian community. The setting will include the opportunity for adults and children to share in the making of a generational symbol, the cornhusk doll. The legend of the cornhusk doll will be told before work begins so that the students have a sense of the purpose of the activity. While listening to musical recordings of authentic folksongs of the region, the students will assemble the dolls. As mentioned previously, this activity will be done in collaboration with another teacher who is an expert in doll making. In the absence of expert advice, detailed information may be found in the Burke article online.

### ***Activity Two***

In order to experience the folk music of the Appalachian people, students will first learn the original version of the song “Mr. Frog Went A-Courtin’.” The teacher should emphasize the fantastical aspects of the story telling, discussing embellishments, elaboration of detail, and the purpose or value of the song in the community. The nature of folk songs will be discussed, explaining how the song may change after being passed down from generation to generation. After the original song has been learned, students will read the story as told in a modern Hip-Hop style, with Froggie as a gangster, albeit a friendly one, and Miss Mousie as a nightclub owner (O’Malley). As the lesson develops, it is important for the teacher to explain that the Froggie gangster is the “bad guy.” The students will add their own Hip-Hop music with various instruments to represent each character in the story, create dance steps, and fashion appropriate costumes to act out the story.

### ***Evaluation***

In a culminating event, students will present their rendition of “Mr. Frog Went A-Courtin’” in the Hip-Hop style for other students. Students should be able to explain how folk songs change over time and discuss how certain elements like melody, style, concept, and rhythms may be varied. The cornhusk dolls will be displayed in a prominent school space and used to demonstrate variation of design in the use of found materials. Students will develop ways to “play” with the dolls, telling stories of their own. A journal will be kept for personal evaluation of the activities.

## **Lesson Three**

### ***Materials***

Audiotape or compact disc recording of *Rap Builder*  
Classroom rhythm instruments  
Costuming materials such as scarves, sunglasses, and colorful Tee shirts  
Fabric paint to decorate the Tee shirts  
Dry-erase board and pens  
Paper and colored markers  
Scraps of material and recyclable objects  
Poster paints  
Large sheets of butcher paper

## ***Objectives***

Our primary objective in this lesson is to foster creative thinking about how the arts serve a fundamental purpose to the culture in which we live. Each student will demonstrate an understanding of Hip-Hop style in a positive mode by composing a Hip-Hop piece about the power of artistic expression. The students will collaboratively develop a musical play entitled *World without Art*. This work will encourage student creativity in all of the arts. The students will compare and contrast fundamental theories of art as defined by Dewey and Anderson. Dewey's *cognitivist* view and Anderson's *expressionist* and *instrumentalist* art theories will be identified in this project.

## ***Activity One***

Gathering information from their journals kept throughout this unit, students will write a rap-style piece of music telling what would happen in a world without the arts. To provide historical and cultural context, they will compare and contrast elements of the arts in the indigenous North American cultures, the Appalachian communities, and our modern Hip-Hop society. In order to develop Hip-Hop style pieces, students will move to musical selections from the *Rap Builder*. The instrumental selections from the *Rap Builder* provide basic beats and rhythms in a variety of rap styles. As students listen to these set rap tracks without lyrics, they will improvise rhyming words and write them in their notebooks. Using one set track and the improvised rhyming words, students will then join together in small groups, elaborating details in order to polish several verses and a refrain. Finally, all verses will be learned and a representative refrain chosen by the entire class.

## ***Activity Two***

With the help of the classroom teacher, the art specialist, and the music or dance teacher, the students will collaboratively develop a musical play entitled *World without Art*. This work will be used as a vehicle to celebrate the arts through poetry, rhyme, beat, music, fashion, graffiti art, mural scenery, and dance movement. The dramatic action of the musical play will begin with the premise that the arts have disappeared from the American landscape. As the story unfolds on an empty, barren stage, students will collaboratively add pieces of mural art, music, and dance to that empty landscape. Scene one in this one-act mini-drama will show how students react to life without artistic opportunities. They will recall the world as it once was with indigenous native art, Appalachian community traditions, and now censored Hip-Hop style. Within this presentation, students will refer to the defacement of property with gang propaganda as a primary reason for censorship and discuss how a culture of nihilism contributed to the *World without Art*. The rap-style pieces collected from activity one will be used to highlight the pervasive loneliness felt without musical expression, as a kind of choral commentary. By contrast, at the end of scene two, all aspects of a new culture enriched by the arts will be demonstrated on stage. Various arts will be presented as a new "universal language," depicting a more positive means of expression and an effective communication of knowledge.

## ***Evaluation***

In this culminating activity, students will further elaborate their discoveries about the value of art in their journals. Students will debate the question of "Is art necessary to the survival of mankind?" At the conclusion of this lesson, students will present their work to the school community in a performance of *World without Art*. Parents, grandparents, other students, and community members will be invited to comment on the production they attend.

## CONCLUSION

In this curriculum unit, we have posed a question about the value of arts education: “How do we measure success in American society?” Our contention is that without the arts, the depth and complexity of what makes us human will be lost. Education provides a vehicle for students to experience the arts and to determine from the diverse range of choices what best helps them express their individuality. Without arts education, students will have limited choices available to them. Our purpose and focus of this unit is to provide a cross-cultural arts experience for students as they study indigenous peoples of North America, Appalachian communities, and contemporary Hip-Hop culture. In a culminating activity, students will create their own musical play about the absence of the arts in society. In collaboration with the art teacher, classroom teachers, and the music or dance teacher, the play *World Without Art* will graphically and emotionally depict the void left in the human experience. Students will discover that there is compelling evidence that music, art, dance, and dramatic traditions stay alive in the *context* of their invention to perpetuate the values of a given culture. In other words, we recognize the people of a particular society for the ways that they express human nature and pass along traditions in the education of their youth.

Whether it is from indigenous peoples of North America, Appalachian communities, or Hip-Hop culture, artistic expression is a vital component of life. By comparing and contrasting three different cultures, students will have shown the value of the arts to those societies. In this curriculum unit, students have defined art, according to the theories of John Dewey and Richard Anderson. For Dewey, art is the “universal language” that “expresses the life of a community,” and a direct result of creative participation in a given culture. For him, the creative act is its vital component as it communicates thought. Anderson’s definition points to specific ways that we can evaluate art as we examine it in context of its “culturally significant meaning, skillfully encoded in an affecting, sensuous medium” (Anderson, *Calliope’s Sisters* 277).

With a well-grounded arts education and by accepting all artistic expression as valid within our society, students and adults alike are free to develop their own creative powers and personally evaluate art’s meaning for themselves. The success of individuals will be viewed through the prism of creative participation, as well as defined by an astute observation of the world around them. Through this participatory process, students and adults alike become more than consumers; all of us become “artists-in-residence” in our own communities. From there we begin to bridge the gap between world societies. Beyond the political and cultural borders, we develop empathy for others as we define what makes us all truly human.

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