

# *translations*

*In this Issue*

Qualities of Quality:  
Understanding Excellence  
in Arts Education



*Qualities of Quality: Understanding Excellence in Arts Education* is a research study commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and conducted by Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, with support by the Arts Education Partnership. All quotes for this Translations piece are taken from *Qualities of Quality: Understanding Excellence in Arts Education* unless otherwise noted. A copy of the full 2009 report is available through The Wallace Foundation website: [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

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#### **ABOUT THE ARTS EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE TRANSLATIONS SERIES**

The Arts Education Collaborative is committed to strengthening education by making the arts central to learning through collaboration, research, and advocacy. To that end, the Translations Series provides arts educators with highlights of prominent research pieces in education and ways in which that research can be realized in their classroom, school, district or arts and culture environment in a practical way.

For more information or to provide feedback, please contact the Arts Education Collaborative at [info@artsedcollaborative.org](mailto:info@artsedcollaborative.org) or 412-201-7405.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

This study is the first large-scale research to focus on the experience of learners in arts education settings, including the challenges of creating and sustaining high quality formal arts learning experiences for K–12 youth, inside and outside of school. The study considered urban, suburban and rural locations and included programs in dance, music, theatre, and visual arts, as well as some emerging forms, like spoken word. (6) The study examined quality as both a synonym for excellence and the criteria for excellence through three broad questions:

- 1 How do arts educators in the United States—including leading practitioners, theorists, and administrators—conceive of and define high quality arts learning and teaching?
- 2 What markers of excellence do educators and administrators look for in the actual activities of arts learning and teaching as they unfold in the classroom?
- 3 How does a program's foundational decisions, as well as its ongoing day-to-day decisions, affect the pursuit and achievement of quality? (6)

In considering these questions, the researchers utilized three methods to collect data: a literature review, interviews with sixteen recognized theorists and practitioners in the field, and site visits to twelve notable programs, yielding interviews with over 250 people. In choosing the literature for review, interviewees, and sites to visit, the researchers used an extensive nomination process. The report is designed to present the findings of this research, along with tools to aid arts educators and their colleagues to, “reflect on and discuss the character of high quality arts learning and teaching in their own settings.” (III)

Six major themes and findings are identified in the report and include:

- 1 The drive for quality is personal, passionate, and persistent. . . . Students should have experiences with quality: master works of art, excellent materials, etc; as well as experiences of quality: powerful group interactions and ensemble work, performances that make them feel proud, rewarding practice sessions, technical excellence, and successful expressivity.
- 2 Quality arts education serves multiple purposes simultaneously. Seven of these goals include:
  - > Foster broad dispositions and skills, especially the capacity to think creatively and the capacity to make connections.
  - > Teach artistic skills and techniques without making them primary.
  - > Develop aesthetic awareness.
  - > Provide ways of pursuing understanding of the world.
  - > Help students engage with community, civic, and social issues.
  - > Provide a venue for students to express themselves.
  - > Help students develop as individuals.
- 3 Quality reveals itself “in the room” through four different lenses: learning, pedagogy, community dynamics, and environment.
- 4 Foundational decisions matter. . . . Foundational, program-defining decisions that give a program its identity and provide the parameters within which quality is pursued.
- 5 Decisions and decision makers at all levels affect quality. Decision makers consist of people far away from the classroom (e.g. policy makers and administrators), people “just outside the classroom” (e.g. principals), and people “in the room” (e.g. teachers, artists, and students).
- 6 Reflection and dialogue is important at all levels. (III–IV)

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From these findings, particularly the last two listed here, the researchers also identify “twin challenges” to quality arts teaching and learning: those of reflection and alignment. Reflection by all decision makers and alignment among decisions and decision makers greatly affect the quality of the experiences provided to learners. (V) To address these challenges, the researchers developed four tools to be used by individuals or groups in workshops or other collegial settings in order to foster quality.

This is further supported in the report later in the document when considering the importance of resources. Ultimately, the study found that:

...as critical as resources are—and everyone agrees on their critical importance—it is more profoundly challenging to achieve quality if you don’t know what it is you are actually trying to achieve—what it looks like, what its essential elements are in your context, and what is required to achieve it. (63)

In other words, the conversations surrounding alignment and goals, and reflecting on desired state compared with current practice, are a vital component in understanding, achieving and sustaining quality in arts education.

In the final chapter, the authors outline some of the implications of this work for several audiences, from the perspective of the researchers. These implications reflect the belief of the researchers that it is:

...time to move beyond the legislative perspective on quality, in which the primary focus is on policies that create the conditions for high quality arts programs, and instead embrace an experience perspective, in which the primary focus is on the nature of the learning experience for students. (85)

These implications range from students understanding that they are decision makers in the learning process to advocates developing a, “...sensitivity to the complexity of defining, achieving and sustaining quality, as well as to the contextual meaning of quality in different settings...” (87) Further, understanding the broad picture that the entirety of these implications presents is important for all constituencies to comprehend the issue of quality. This in turn allows everyone involved to appreciate the need for distinct criteria for excellence to be developed in each situation.

The authors do not describe a list of criteria to define quality arts education using any definition available throughout the report. The closest they come is to say that quality arts education experiences have some “necessary ingredients” on a programmatic level.

These include:

- > Striving for multiple purposes simultaneously.
- > Shaping and examining the quality of student learning experiences to make sure that they align with core program goals and beliefs.
- > Taking care that foundational decisions about who, what, where, and how the arts are taught are well-aligned with a program’s big purposes.
- > Continually seeking alignment between a program’s purposes, its vision of quality, and the programmatic decisions that are made at all levels by all constituencies. (88)

In clarifying the entire report, the authors include a statement about their hopes for the report, understanding that it may or may not be what was expected from this work:

“If there is one overarching theme to our findings, it is that continuous reflection and discussion about what constitutes quality and how to achieve it is both a catalyst for and a sign of quality. In other words, thinking deeply about quality—talking about it, worrying about it, continually revisiting ideas about its characteristics and its indicators—is essential both to the pursuit and achievement of excellence in arts education. Our fondest hope for this report is that it sparks discussion. We most definitely do not offer here a recipe for arts education. Rather, we hope that this report will energize and inform a national conversation and encourage policy makers and practitioners to engage in open and critical dialogue about what counts as quality in arts education and about how they can make decisions at all levels of policy, administration, and teaching to support such quality.” (9)

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## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE ARTS EDUCATION COLLABORATIVE AND ITS CONSTITUENTS

With such a robust and yet, at times, vague report, the Arts Education Collaborative (AEC) is continually revisiting this research for ways to apply and synthesize this information into current practice. While the underpinnings may reinforce what we are doing in subtle ways, we are also looking for practical and more direct linkages. One of the ways we are doing that is by adapting the tools embedded in Chapter Six of this report for use in our different programs. In this chapter, the authors share four lenses by which to view and critique quality: student learning, pedagogy, community dynamics, and environment. To stimulate discussion, we have developed questions to help practitioners identify whether quality is occurring in relation to each of these lenses. For example, when using the lens of community dynamics, three components were identified by the researchers. They are shown here with our corresponding questions as sub-bullets:

- 1 **Respect and trust among all participants, along with a belief in student capabilities (38–39)**
  - > Is there a sense of community in the learning space?
  - > Do students show respect for and trust in the capacities of their peers?
  - > Do students support each other?
  - > Do students solicit each other's feedback more often than or as frequently as they ask for teacher feedback?
  - > Does the educator show a genuine interest in students' ideas, interests, and background knowledge?
  - > Do adults in the room model respect for and interest in each other's work?
- 2 **Open communication (39–40)**
  - > Do students raise questions, offer ideas, consider others' ideas, express feelings, share work, engage in constructive critique, and reflect on processes and products?
- 3 **Collaboration (40–41)**
  - > Are students working both alone and in groups?
  - > Is the collaboration happening in groups productive?

To date, we have shared the four lenses, their descriptors, and our questions with participants of the Leadership Academy for educators, as well as participants in the Community of Learners for Arts Education programs for school and district administrators. In each instance, the group discussion was dynamic as each individual considered the ramifications and applications for the list. Among many, one intriguing revelation by these groups was that these questions are applicable for quality learning in any content area, not solely the arts.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR EDUCATORS

This research promotes the idea that critical examination of arts learning experiences (not merely arts activities) is a truer test of excellence in arts education than the production of artistic products. Finding ways to document these learning experiences over time and as they occur may provide different mechanisms for understanding the arts than previously perceived. Communicating this value to administrators and parents, as well as the students themselves, should be considered worthy goals of both individual teachers and departments that are seeking to pursue excellence in their settings. Reflection is a logical place to start, and it seems practical to put research into practice by using the four lenses to develop questions for that reflection.

The idea of a student as a decision maker was a finding of this study that was unexpected by the researchers from the outset. Different as this perspective is from older models that suggest students are vessels to be filled, it is worth additional reflection and discussion among administrators, teachers, parents and students. Knowing and embracing that students have a critical role in the learning process changes the emphasis of responsibility and ownership to be shared and bringing all parties to this understanding may significantly change classroom dynamics. Ultimately:

“There are no shortcuts. Achieving quality involves an ongoing examination of programmatic as well as personal purposes and values, along with a continual examination of what is actually happening ‘in the room.’ This quest does not end. Arts educators deeply committed to quality know that this search is an essential element of what constitutes quality. It is perhaps one of the greatest lessons we can offer our students—that the pursuit of quality is both central to the achievement of excellence and a wonderful, challenging, and compelling learning experience in itself.” (88)



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Cover image by Keith Hershberger