

Arts Education and Gifted and Talented Students

As an “end state for human development” (Gardner, 1973, p. 7), participation in the arts is vital to personal growth and human flourishing. The arts present and represent human experience as a dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments, creating culture (Dewey, 1934/1980) and enabling the practice of freedom (hooks, 1995). NAGC supports that education in visual, literary, media, and performing arts is essential to fulfill individual potential and enrich society, and recommends that screening for artistic potential, identifying artistic talent, and providing timely and appropriate arts education are indispensable to an equitable system of gifted education.

Research Overview

Unequal distribution of opportunities for essential arts education persists (Holochwost et al., 2025; Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011). When resources are limited and other subject areas are prioritized, arts programs may be cut entirely or kept only to support non-arts objectives. Arts education is conducive to unexpected outcomes and often unyielding to standardization (Eisner, 1994). When standardized test results fall short, resources may be channeled to teaching skills readily measured in other subjects than the arts (Bullard & Bahar, 2023; Moon et al, 2007).

This pattern of bias in access to arts education limits the artistic development of many children in underresourced schools and communities. In the United States, such negatively impacted communities disproportionately include students of color. The lack of arts education and arts talent development opportunities in these communities may limit the diversity of both consumers and producers of culture (Feder & Israel, 2024). Conversely, achieving greater diversity among both artists and their audiences has the potential to promote stronger societal contributions of the arts and more fully foster the development of human potential.

Two forms of arts education play a role in well-rounded, culturally responsive education for all learners: Learning *in* the arts and learning in other subjects *through and with* the arts (Burnaford et al., 2007). Both approaches contribute to personal growth, helping to strengthen problem-solving and creativity, but arts-specific instruction is crucial to the development of artistic talent.

Students with outstanding intellectual ability or academic performance benefit from appropriate arts education, though, by common achievement measures, they may seem to thrive without it. In the arts, they may learn artistic inquiry and navigate the interaction between artist, artistic work, and audience. They may become increasingly discriminating in qualitative perception and *metaperception*—a form of reflection that integrates cognition, perception, and emotion—to make meaning of artistic work (Haroutounian, 2017). Culturally responsive education that includes the arts also

helps gifted children see themselves and their own culture centered in school and community-based programs.

Children with outstanding artistic ability, including prodigies who exhibit a *rage to master* adult-level skills within a domain, will be much less likely to grow into accomplished artists without deliberate practice guided by others (Winner & Drake, 2018). To contribute meaningfully as artists, they need help from peers, family, teachers, and mentors in and out of school.

Research-Based Best Practices

- Appropriateness and timeliness of both identification and services vary by artistic domain, student, and situation within which a talented student is found, whether in school or community sites of learning. Early on, specialized programs should provide opportunities to fall in love with art, music, dance, theater, or creative writing. They should offer early exposure to experts in the field so students may begin to gain both explicit and tacit insider knowledge.
- Alert to what may come next on the path to expertise, program staff guide deliberate practice and provide accelerated access to authentic arts education opportunities. This may include individualized instruction in the form of lessons and mentorships, and a gradual transfer of control from the adults to the students to foster independence. At the right times, teachers, mentors, and coaches help talented students to develop psychosocial skills demanded of them in performance, exhibition, critique, and competition.
- Individualized plans, such as those facilitated for the arts by gifted education policy in many states, may help schools respond to changing needs as a student moves through phases along a distinct trajectory of talent development. Unequal access to arts education for underserved students, however, may obscure early expression of potential, perpetuating inequitable identification and support. Identifying all students who may benefit from advanced, specialized arts programs presents challenges that may be addressed through the following recommendations—applied to the arts from NAGC guidance for gifted identification (NAGC, n.d.) and for championing equity (NAGC, 2020):
 - **Universal screening.** To ensure that all have the opportunity to demonstrate their potential in the arts, conduct universal screening. Identify emerging talent within programs that foster broad participation in arts experiences across a wide range of ages, through either general arts education or arts-integrated education (see Heil, 2024).
 - **Local norms.** To identify outstanding artistic aptitude and potential, compare students’ artistic products or performances with those of peers who have had similar opportunities to engage in the arts. Use local norms as a reference for evidence of ability, whether employing quantitative or qualitative approaches. Local comparison

may also support recognition of artistic qualities that are culturally situated or valued within particular communities.

- **Multiple sources.** Inferences made about a student's potential in the arts can include multiple sources of both qualitative and quantitative evidence specific to the arts, such as formal observation of behavior or performance by teachers or experts; assessment of products and performances; teacher-, parent-, or self-nomination; or recognition earned beyond the school site in competitive performances or exhibitions.
- **Timely identification.** Identification efforts should be timed to match a domain's developmental trajectory, allowing for as wide a range of entry points as appropriate. A narrow and early window of opportunity may be appropriate for beginning to nurture the talents of future concert violinists and ballet dancers, for example, in contrast to vocal training, which typically begins later at physical maturity (Preckel et al., 2020). In theater, by contrast, promising actors and directors may enter intensive training later in development without limiting their prospects for success (Oreck et al., 2004).
- **Motivation.** To ensure that all students who may respond favorably participate in advanced, specialized arts programs, include students who have not been formally identified but are highly motivated to do

advanced work. Task commitment is a strong predictor of high performance (Reis & Peters, 2021). A student who works hard to meet high expectations for practice, focus, energy, improvement, and quality of work not only benefits from participating but also strengthens the learning environment for other participants in the program. When educators demonstrably value motivation and effort, they can encourage all students to adopt mindsets conducive to growth rather than beliefs in fixed ability that may inhibit it (Dweck, 2012).

Conclusion

The research and practices outlined in this position paper support a clear imperative: Identifying, nurturing, and advancing artistic talent and providing a well-rounded, arts-inclusive gifted education must be intentional, equitable, and informed by developmental theory. By aligning gifted education and arts education with what is known of artistic development, educators and policymakers can help ensure that all children are empowered to realize their full potential. NAGC supports that education in the visual, literary, media, and performing arts is essential to fulfilling individual potential and enriching society, and that screening for artistic potential, identifying artistic talent, and providing timely and appropriate arts education are indispensable to an equitable system of gifted education.

Resources

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- Kay, S. (2019). *On human potential*. Rowman & Littlefield. (Offers engaging discussion and a practical system for finding and nurturing domain-specific talent in school, including the domains of visual and performing arts.)
- NAGC Arts Network: <https://www.nagc.org/networks-and-special-interest-groups> (NAGC's Arts Network connects a community of parents, teachers, administrators, and scholars interested in identifying and serving the next generation of diverse visual and performing artists.)

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