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Books

Guggenheim Study Suggests Arts Education Benefits Literacy Skills



Enid Alvarez

Students at Public School 8 participating in the Guggenheim Museum's Learning Through Art program.

By [RANDY KENNEDY](#)

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In an era of widespread cuts in public-school art programs, the question has become increasingly relevant: does learning about paintings and sculpture help children become better students in other areas?

A study to be released today by the Solomon R. [Guggenheim Museum](#) suggests that it does, citing improvements in a range of literacy skills among students who took part in a program in which the Guggenheim sends artists into schools. The study, now in its second year, interviewed hundreds of New York City third graders, some of whom had participated in the Guggenheim program, called Learning Through Art, and others who did not.

The study found that students in the program performed better in six categories of literacy and critical thinking skills — including thorough description, hypothesizing and reasoning — than did students who were not in the program. The children were assessed as they discussed a passage in a children's book, Cynthia Kadohata's "Kira-Kira," and a painting by Arshile Gorky, "The Artist and His Mother."

The results of the study, which are to be presented today and tomorrow at a conference at the Guggenheim, are likely to stimulate debate at a time when the federal education law known as No Child Left Behind has led schools to increase class time spent on math and reading significantly, often at the expense of other subjects, including art.

Yet the study also found that the program did not help improve students' scores on the city's standardized English language arts test, a result that the study's creators said they could not fully explain. They suggested that the disparity might be related to the fact that the standardized test is written while the study's interviews were oral.

"We purposely chose to have students talk to us instead of writing because we thought they would show language skills, not purely reading and writing skills," said Johanna Jones, a senior associate with Randi Korn and Associates, a museum research company conducting the study over three years with a \$640,000 grant from the federal Department of Education.

Ms. Jones said that the study, which graded students' responses as they talked about the painting and the passage from the book, found essentially the same results during the 2005-6 school year as it did during the 2004-5 school year. "We really held our breath waiting for this year's results, and they turned out to almost exactly the same — which means that last year's don't seem to have been an anomaly," she said. "That's a big deal in this world."

While it is unknown exactly how learning about art helps literacy skills, she said, "the hypothesis is that the use of both talking about art and using inquiry to help students tease apart the meaning of paintings helps them learn how to tease apart the meanings of texts, too. They apply those skills to reading."

The categories of literacy and critical thinking skills were devised by the research company with the help of a group of advisers from [Columbia University](#), [New York University](#) and the city's Department of Education, among other institutions.

The Guggenheim program, originally called Learning to Read Through the Arts, was created by a museum trustee in 1970, when New York schools were cutting art and music programs. Since it began, it has involved more than 130,000 students in dozens of public schools. The museum dispatches artists who spend one day a week at schools over a 10- or 20-week period helping students and teachers learn about and make art. Groups of students are also taken to the Guggenheim to see exhibitions.

Officials at the Guggenheim said they hoped the study would give ammunition to educators in schools and museums around the country who are seeking more money and classroom time for arts education.

"Basically, this study is a major contribution to the field of art and museum education," said Kim Kanatani, the Guggenheim's director of education. "We think it confirms what we as museum education professionals have intuitively known but haven't ever had the resources to prove."