



Project Zero is a research group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education that investigates the development of learning processes in the arts and other disciplines.

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*Qualities of  
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## Deepening the Quality of Arts Education

Many children in the United States have little or no opportunity for formal arts instruction, and access to arts learning experiences remains a critical national challenge. Additionally, the *quality* of arts learning opportunities that are available to young people is a serious concern. Understanding this second challenge—the challenge of creating and sustaining high quality formal arts learning experiences for K-12 youth, inside and outside of school—is the focus of a recent research initiative, *The Qualities of Quality: Excellence in Arts Education and How to Achieve It*, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and conducted by Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The study focuses on the character of excellence itself and asks three core 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 art learning and teaching as they unfold in the classroom? And (3) How does a program’s foundational decisions, as well as its ongoing day-to-day decisions, affect the pursuit and achievement of quality?

These questions were investigated through three strands of research: Interviews with leading arts practitioners, theorists and administrators; site visits to exemplary arts programs across a range of media and settings; and a review of published literature. Sources in each of these areas were selected through an extensive nomination process in which several hundred arts educators and administrators across the country working in wide variety of contexts and art forms nominated candidates in each area.

The report presents several major findings and offers a set of tools to help arts educators and their associates reflect on and discuss the character of high quality

arts learning and teaching in their own settings.

Some of the major themes and findings of the study include:

***The drive for quality is personal, passionate, and persistent.*** For most of the people surveyed in this study, ideas about what constitutes quality in arts education are inextricably tied to fundamental issues of identity and meaning and to their values as artists, educators, and citizens in the world. Though people differ in their specific visions and concerns, a commonality among almost all we spoke to is that the drive for quality is persistent and far-reaching. This drive is ever-present in all aspects of their educational work and shapes their goals for young people. For example, most educators we interviewed wanted young people to have experience *with* quality—for example, excellent materials, outstanding works of art, passionate and accomplished artist-teachers modeling their artistic processes—and experiences *of* quality—powerful group interactions and ensemble work, performances that make them feel proud, rewarding practice sessions, appropriate technical excellence, and successful expressivity.

***Quality arts education serves multiple purposes simultaneously.*** The question of what constitutes high quality arts education is deeply linked to the question of why we should be teaching the arts. So it’s not surprising that when arts educators talk about excellence they also express ideas about the fundamental purposes of arts education—ideas about what students ought to learn through the arts and why these outcomes are important. Many purposes were mentioned by our informants, and most of them cluster into a handful of broad areas. For example, many arts educators believe that one of the important purposes of arts education is to foster broad dispositions and habits of mind, especially the capacity to

think creatively, and the capacity to make connections. Many also believe that arts education should help students develop aesthetic awareness and visual observation skills and provide venues for self-expression and self-exploration.

It is notable that most of the people we spoke with believe good arts programs tend to serve several purposes simultaneously. Though arts programs differ widely in their contexts, goals, art forms, and constituencies, a hallmark sign of high quality arts learning in any program is that the learning experiences are rich and complex for all learners, engaging them on many levels and helping them learn and grow in a variety of ways.

***Quality reveals itself “in the room” through four different lenses.*** When you ask arts educators what they take to be the signs of high quality arts education, they are as likely to point to features of the experience in the setting itself as they are to broad purposes and outcomes. These experiential elements are what you’d expect to observe or infer if you opened the door onto a classroom, studio, or rehearsal hall, and looked for markers of quality.

There are multiple kinds of markers, and one way to look for them is to examine the “in the room” experience through four different but overlapping lenses: *learning*; *teaching*; *classroom community*, and *environment*. These lenses all focus on the same experience, but each one brings a different dimension into focus. The *learning* lens focuses on what students are actually doing in the classroom—the kinds of projects and tasks they’re involved in and the character of their engagement. The *teaching* lens focuses on how teachers conceive of and practice their craft—how they conceptualize the teacher-student relationship, and how they design and implement instruction. The *classroom community* lens reveals the social dynamic of the relationships in the classroom, including relationships among the students themselves, between students and teachers, and among the teachers and other adults who are present. The *environment* lens focuses on concrete elements such as the physical space of the classroom, the materials and physical resources available, and the kind of time students are given—hours as well as years—to engage in arts learning.

***Foundational decisions matter.*** Arts education programs are based on foundational, program-defining decisions that give a program its identity and provide the parameters within which quality is pursued. These decisions include: (1) *Who teaches the arts?* (2) *Where are the arts taught?* (3) *What is taught and how?* And (4) *How is arts learning assessed?* Scholars have written extensively about these decisions, and the literature often takes the form of debate, with arguments made for one side or another. In practice, the ways in

which high quality programs answer these questions tend to be nuanced and contextualized, often embodying high principles and pragmatic concerns at the same time.

***Decisions and decision-makers at all levels affect quality.*** Many decision-makers play a critical role in the quality of arts learning experiences. These include people quite far away from the classroom (e.g., administrators, funders, policy makers); those just outside the room—notably program staff and parents; and those who are in the room (students, teachers, artists). Decisions made by those in the room have tremendous power to support or undermine the quality of the learning experience. This is especially true of students, and it is important for students to be as aware as possible of the potential impact of their choices on their own and others’ learning experiences. This may seem obvious, but the role of student choice is often overlooked in discussions of quality, and it invites greater attention.

***Reflection and dialogue is important at all levels.*** An overarching theme across many of the findings of this study is that continuous reflection and discussion about what constitutes quality and how to achieve it is not only a catalyst *for* quality, but also 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 of excellence in arts education and to its achievement. Another overarching theme is that a misalignment of ideas among decision-makers about what constitutes quality often complicates a program’s pursuit of it. Alignment is easy to ignore, and achieving alignment among decision-makers at all levels often requires far more basic investigation, dialogue, and negotiation than is given.

The report offers several tools to help decision-makers address the twin challenges of reflection and alignment. The tools are designed to be used solo or in workshops or other collegial settings. Their purpose is to help arts educators and their associates build and clarify their visions of high quality arts education, identify elements of quality in their own programs, reflect on the relationship between quality and a program’s foundational decisions, seek alignment between a program’s beliefs about quality and its practices, and seek alignment across decision-makers at all levels who help to shape a program’s pursuit of quality.