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### **“It gets them in the door.”**

“There is no greater predictor for failure in life than success in high school.” Legend has it that the great writer and bon vivant Truman Capote (of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* fame) coined these disparaging words. Capote, who left high school at 17, is one of the many famous people whose alternate roads to success (often in the arts) are celebrated in casual conversation or catalogued in Internet listings such as “Celebrity Dropouts” or “Famous High School Dropouts.”<sup>1</sup> These collections boast writers and Mensa geniuses along with superstars in the entertainment industry.

While the lists affirm what young adults who dropped out of high school seem to know—that they were not inadequate losers incapable of succeeding—the roster of impressive names obscures the reality looming for the vast majority of students who choose to leave school. High school dropouts are far more likely to be unemployed and, if employed, to earn less than their peers who graduate. Their chances are increased for poverty, public assistance, and time in prison. And they are more likely to be divorced, in poor health, and single parents of children who will similarly go on to drop out of school. If they had it to do again, most high school dropouts would have stayed in school.<sup>2</sup>

On average, one-fourth of the students who are currently enrolled in our high schools will not graduate. When it comes to minority students (African American, Latino, or Native American), that percentage reaches nearly one-half. The intellectual and financial resources of educational leaders, government, nonprofits, private foundations, social entrepreneurs, and research institutions have been marshaled to face the daunting task of turning around what are called “dropout factories,” high schools with attrition rates of more than 60%.<sup>3</sup> Without contest, our alarming high school dropout rate is the most urgent problem facing school reformers on the local and national level. In the pages that follow, I argue that increasing opportunities for arts education in the high school curriculum will help to save the day.

Almost every high school student enters 9th grade with the intention not only of graduating, but also of pursuing postsecondary education. But somewhere along the way too many become detached and lose sight of their goals. What goes wrong? Young adults who have dropped out of high school tell us that, among factors that range from familial demands to peer pressure, their top reason for leaving was that high school was “boring”; “nothing I was interested in”; “the teacher just stood in the front of the room and

just talked and didn't really like involve you." The courses, these individuals report, did not seem relevant to their present or future lives.<sup>4</sup>

A lack of interest and relevance erodes the energy and incentive needed to leave your house and go to school. And the more days skipped, the more nights of homework undone, the steeper the climb back into the day-to-day life of school. Absenteeism is not only a prominent indicator of the level or lack of student engagement, it has also been identified as a high-risk marker of a student's likelihood for dropping out.<sup>5</sup> Students vote with their feet, and they are exiting left and right.

High engagement, teacher attention, and increased attendance have long been positively associated with the arts. Dedicated high school students tell us that arts learning inspires passion and engagement on their part and on the part of their teachers. It also inspires industrious hard work that permeates their lives at school.<sup>6</sup> An arts teacher at a public high school reports that "Individual students have told me they come to school for the arts, even if they dread Engineering, Spanish, or Math. It gets them in the door and makes them feel good about themselves."<sup>7</sup>

Recent dropout interventions include quick responses to markers of risk (often apparent in elementary and middle school) such as absenteeism, behavior change, and course failure. Increasing state requirements for compulsory attendance (raising the age at which students are permitted to drop out from 16 to 18) puts higher stakes on leaving school early. Professional training improves teachers' effectiveness, as does strong leadership support. A variety of pathways to graduation, including online courses and schedules that allow students to work, provide alternative venues, while increased oversight from parents and tutors bolsters individual attention.<sup>8</sup>

Supportive strategies such as these are happily meeting with measurable success, but they do not directly address the reported lack of interest and relevance in the subject matter of high school classes. We must consider content along with presentation as we seek to increase the draw of the mainstream courses these students reject. In doing so, it makes sense to turn for remediation to subject areas that give meaning to so many students' lives at school. The time is now, I suggest, to feature rather than to exclude the compelling arenas of drama, music, visual arts, and dance. And this suggestion is not without precedence.

A recent research study, *Staying in School*, reports that in low-performing schools in New York City, when the arts were included, students more frequently attended school on a daily basis, and furthermore, they stayed to graduate. An analysis of 200 New York City schools over a 2-year period demonstrated

that graduation rates were in the top third in those schools providing the most access to and the greatest resources for arts education, while those in the bottom third provided the least. The report concludes with the recommendation that an increase in students' access to arts instruction and experience would improve school life and elevate graduation rates nationwide.<sup>9</sup>

Researchers and educators have observed the power of the arts to enrich school culture and to engage a diverse range of students. From the stellar student who wants to round out her applications to college, to every student who longs to express personal fears and dreams, to the disenfranchised adolescent who admires the image of the artist as outsider. These students come to and for art classes and they stay in school for the rest. And we have yet to mention those individuals with serious aspirations for careers in the arts.

What in particular about the arts captures the attention and dedication of so many young people? That question has driven much of my prior work and is the subject of the work at hand.<sup>10</sup> I intend to provide the reader (the high school student, concerned parent, school administrator, teacher, arts education advocate, and/or policymaker) with the necessary information and perspective with which to argue for a prominent place for the arts in the reformation of high school curriculum.

My discussions benefit not only from prior research but also from recent observations, interviews, and surveys drawn from high school students and teachers of the arts in independent (day and boarding), public, charter, and pilot high school settings. On this account, I have been able to thread my text with the voices of those who are too frequently omitted from the great stage of educational reform: the students and teachers who are the leading players in the drama. While my advocate's voice offers cadence, it is they who articulate best what is compelling about the arts for young people at this particular, important, and, for many, perilous juncture in their lives.

I hope what we uncover here will assist mainstream educational reformers in their rescue of the American high school. Surely arts education advocates will find affirmation and fodder in the pages that follow. But this book also aims to serve those who have yet to consider the importance of the arts in our children's education. In sum, persuasion and change are the objectives of the broader work. As for the balance of my introduction, I set the stage for later discussions by providing briefly: 1) historical context for high schools and arts education; 2) developmental context for students and the arts; and 3) an overview of the order and content of the chapters that follow.

**“The idea that I can create these things . . . ”**

In the musical *Sunday in the Park with George*, the painter Georges Seurat, through the lyrics and music of Steven Sondheim, explains art-making with a simple reverent phrase, “Look I made a hat, where there never was a hat.”<sup>1</sup> It may be a visual image, assemblage, sculpture, dance performance, or original poem or song. But in the arts, there is always an entity that is created, something that was not there before the artist painted, assembled, sculpted, danced, or wrote it. Betty Blayton-Taylor, artist and founder of the Children’s Art Carnival in Harlem, described art-making as “turning our thoughts into things.”<sup>2</sup> And whether the resultant “things” can be seen or heard or touched or watched or even just talked about, there is in mind or actuality a tangible product that inspires and fulfills the artistic process, a product conceived and constructed by the maker of art.

Surely the geometry proofs set out by the math teacher for students to solve or the science experiments designated for students to perform have a material aspect—a something you complete and turn in as assigned. And you can make that submission tidy or messy, accurate or vague, and loaded with or seriously lacking right actions and/or answers. Either way, the assignment is prescribed by the teacher, not invented by the student, and the range of options for completion lie within the boundaries of the task’s and the teacher’s expectations. In short, there is little room within most non-arts class assignments for an imaginative alternative or a personal statement.

If the class is asked to perform an experiment exploring the corrosive nature of oxidation, a student will not be rewarded for submitting a personal poem on metallic decay in lieu of the lab report. It is obviously extremely important for students to learn the scientific method and the ways to apply postulates and theorems to the solution of a geometry proof. But in the manifestation or demonstration of that learning, we see a fundamental difference from learning in the arts.

Unlike the experiment or the proof, from inception to completion, the tangible product that students create in arts classes is of their own design. And this is true even when there are creative constraints such as specified materials in visual arts or suggested themes in music, dance, or drama. The unique composition of the tangible product reflects the imagination and personal agency of its maker.

### Imagination: What If

Imagination, that facility so rightly associated with the arts, is the ability to think beyond the given, to consider “what if.” Personal agency is the realization of one’s own ability to do that and more, to bring the “what if” into being, to make a difference, to “matter.” In the great journey from childhood to adulthood, these two facilities—imagining a future determined by your decisions and actions, and confidence in your ability to affect these ends—are of the utmost importance.<sup>3</sup>

A sophomore who considers himself “not a full-fledged artist but one who is willing to learn more which I think all artists are” told me, “I think of myself as an artist because of how I see things. I never see things for what they are but for what they can be. I see a table and think, ‘how would it look on its side or if somebody were hiding behind it?’” With this ability to see beyond the given, David experiences a sense of personal power: “It’s so beautiful seeing beyond what is there.”

Adults who have dropped out of high school report that a lack of ownership of their work alienated them from assignments. They “complained [that] teachers just told them what to do without involving them in the lesson.”<sup>4</sup> This sentiment was shared by an academically successful senior in an East Coast boarding school: “In the other classes, you put one foot in front of the other. ‘Here is the test, do the bare minimum needed to get the highest grade.’ I put in a higher personal standard for art than for any other class.” Another senior, this one in a West Coast public high school, concurs to the extreme:

Art is the class, where you get to think for yourself without people telling you what to do. . . . In other classes like geometry and science, you’re stuck with a curriculum the teacher gets to choose, and you can’t do anything about it. It’s a dictatorship in a way. “I have this stuff to teach you, and I am going to force you upon it, and you can’t do anything about it. Learn or fail,” that’s the attitude I get from all of my academic classes besides art.

Exploring the difference between arts and non-arts classes, I asked an experienced theater teacher how he thinks his high school-aged students would distinguish his teaching style. “I would hope that they would say we learn together.” He explains how he sets the stage for such collaborative learning:

My approach to teaching has always been a simple one. Let the students lead the way. Encourage them to be skeptical of what you are telling them and make you prove what you are espousing. Avoid at all times the natural tendency to seek approval from you. And most importantly, treat them all as potentially future colleagues.

This community-based teacher aims to teach his students to “be independent and critical thinkers”: If students “don’t feel a personal ownership of the tenants I have taught them, if they aim to get things right as opposed to expressing their true selves, I have failed them.”

An urban school-based high school theater teacher echoed the lesson of agency and ownership:

The primary lesson I strive for is ownership of one’s work. Taking responsibility for one’s choices and knowing one’s own potential is key to this age group. Especially with such a strong population of students who may not be getting strong identity-building experiences outside of school, I focus on what each student does that shows initiative and self-direction. For example, I chart students’ grades based clearly on the quality of their work *and* their ability to navigate their own choices. Do they pass in assignments on time? Do they choose to wear appropriate clothing? Do they decide to read the entire play instead of just their scene? Each aspect of the student’s work is framed as a choice he/she can make that will either aid their understanding of the lesson, or diminish it.

How might the overall experience of those students who dropped out of school have benefited from the opportunities for ownership (as a sense of personal agency) that the arts present?

Through the works of art that they create on their own, students gain a broader and more nuanced understanding of what it is to learn. Right answers are by their very nature replicable. The tangible products created through art are as intrinsically singular. A senior in a charter high school said of her work in the visual arts, “I love that art is unique and cannot be duplicated. Sure, ideas can be recycled and represented and concepts will never cease to reappear. But the image, the mere image itself that I create, can never be repeated.”

The hat. The drawing. The dramatic rendering. These tangible imprints of student effort reflect their makers’ imaginations—their personal considerations of what if. Tenth-grader David said that “creativity is imagination plus belief: wearing a pot lid as a hat is imagination; the belief is that it doesn’t look

bad as a hat.” Where would your imagination and belief take you if you were invited to wrap your secrets in a bundle of clay? That challenging assignment is described in the teaching memoir of visual artist and teacher Richard Olsen. He began the exercise with this intriguing “what if”:

I held up a ball of clay. “What do you think about this?” I asked.

“Nothing . . . just a ball of clay” was the response.

“What if I told you that inside this ball was the principal’s deepest darkest secret; would that change how you looked at it?”

The kids laughed and, imagining what it might be, agreed that somehow the ball of clay would change. We then talked about how what we know or think about something can affect how we relate to it.<sup>5</sup>

Olsen raises the same question of context (“how what we know or think about something can affect how we relate to it”) posed by philosopher Nelson Goodman in his classic essay, *When Is Art?* Not what is art, but when. If a stone is lying in a driveway, do you look at it twice, or at all? But what if that stone is put on a pedestal in an art gallery? Do you see it more fully, even noticing small details of its composition? Does its placement in the museum or your careful attention change the status of that stone, maybe even from something of no meaning to a work of art?<sup>6</sup>

The assignment is to write about a teenager like me. But what if she lives somewhere else? Can I imagine a world very different from mine? How will I give it detail and life? Will she deal with the same problems that I do, or will her world be very different? How different? Unlike the prescribed and fixed frameworks of many assignments in non-arts classes, the challenges that teachers present in arts classrooms are there for students to reframe, reassemble, and redefine.

The student’s autonomy in creating his or her own world can be exhilarating for the adolescent who feels the “stress” (a word frequently used to distinguish between non-arts and arts classrooms) of an environment with prescribed and high-stakes expectations. A 9th-grader tells me that “The art teachers at my school seem a lot less stressed than the other teachers . . . the atmosphere is a lot easier to learn in.” Michael, a veteran high school ceramics teacher, explains:

In my classroom students are given an opportunity to explore many different options or solutions to the problems presented. In most other classes they are simply being fed information and given very few options. My classroom is a place where conversation replaces the lecture format.