

**How Can Our Research Inform Policy?:
Forming a Political Community for Art Education**

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In the current, increasingly reactionary political arena, policy influences on art education are collapsing into international political conservatism and centralization. Historically, similar political situations have not been kind to our field, leading to art education being moved outside of public schools, art being integrated with other school subjects to save money, and art production time being taken over by reading and math requirements to support standardized testing.

The current attacks on public education are as frightening as attacks on free speech, religious freedom, and an independent judiciary. As a result, a concern of the field now must be to address the impact of political conservatism on policy and determine the place of research in this context.

One difficulty in making this determination is that art educational decisions have generally not been based on research. For example, typically, our educational standards have not been tested, the impact of standardization has not been studied, and when studies are done, they tend to be done after policy has been established, making it difficult to effect change. This is of particular concern now that the new Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) is our accrediting body. CAEP has established policies that demand

evidence not previously required, such as new proofs of learning and verifications of data driven decision-making.

Other competing pressures of standardization from outside the field are at play as well (such as edTPA, Core Standards, NAEP, and PARCC) and yet, we know virtually nothing about the effect of these on our field (or perhaps better stated, we haven't proven it). And, these control systems are being generated by both the public and private sectors, such as the National Governors' Association and Pearson Publishing. As a result, we are now in a situation where it has become difficult to act creatively, or even effectively, to make changes in our field based on our own expertise.

Because so few policy-related studies have been done (and this includes proofs of best practice, validations of standards, empirical evidence that supports learning, and so on) a lack of funding is available and policy makers pay little attention to our research. In this climate, our job as responsible researchers must be to move beyond opinion and provide evidence that funders will understand.

In 2009, the Ad Council and Americans for the Arts distributed a television advertisement to support their new tag line: Art - Ask for More, narrated by Alec Baldwin. You may have seen it; it ends with a dog happily bringing a stick to a boy and the boy putting the stick in the garbage. It had a powerful message (although it also had some content issues). But, the ad was criticized because we lack the evidence we need to demonstrate that arts education actually makes a better human being. Compare our research to the research in another "special" school subject, Physical Education; physical educators have demonstrated that

students without opportunities for physical fitness in school are in fact, less healthy.

Almost two decades ago, Laurie Hicks (1990) called for a vision of political community in the field of art education. In the current conservative political climate, that call is more urgent, yet seems to face even greater obstacles. If we intend to form a community of researchers, we need to establish a new culture of research to provide evidence to outside agencies, as well as our colleagues and students, not only of the benefits of art education, but also demonstrations of learning, longitudinal effects of art in school, and even conditional limitations.

Membership in such a community is a form of civic engagement. The undertaking, distribution, and applications of research are social acts. If we intend to create this new culture of research, our community needs to have a serious conversation about the rigor and social obligations of our work.

We now have two vehicles to help us form this community in the United States, the Art Education Research Institute (AERI) and the new NAEA Research Commission. The Research Commission is intended to bring together the professionally diverse membership of NAEA around issues of research. In contrast, AERI is for higher educators and graduate students actively involved in the production of research and scholarship in visual arts education. Its primary aim is to advance research and scholarship in the field, in terms of both quality and breadth. These groups can help us broaden our research questions and methods to examine serious gaps in our knowledge and to improve the quality of research in the field, which should be a continual process in any field.

Let me briefly lay out three action items, which emerged from last years' symposium that need immediate attention: *the importance of quantitative research methods in our field, quality in arts-based research, and research partnerships.*

Quantitative Methods: Data-Based Decision Making

The first action item we need to consider is the place of quantitative methods in the field. Elliot Eisner was instrumental in moving us toward qualitative research starting in the 1970s. When Doug Boughton commented to him about his success in that effort decades later, and what has grown to be a pervasiveness of qualitative research to a near exclusion of other methods, Eisner responded, "that's worse!"

Part of the mission of AERI is to help broaden the research questions in the field and diversity its research methods. Frankly, some things need to be counted. Quantitative methods expertise is necessary to broaden the types of research questions we can ask in the field. Also, most federal and foundation research grants require the application of quantitative methods.

I first noticed the dwindling quantitative studies in our field as a problem in 2001 when I was Co-Editor and then Senior Editor of *Studies in Art Education*, and the problem is getting worse. In the last ten years of the journal, out of 203 articles (not commentaries, book reviews, etc.), only 88 have been based on *empirical* research of any type (that is, *either qualitative or quantitative research*). That's less than 9 empirical research reports per year for the entire field.

Of those 203 articles, only 15 have been quantitative, only about 8%, and 9 have included mix methods. And, in the past two years, we have had *none published of either type* (no quantitative or mix methods studies).

Among the 13 doctoral programs of art education (that's Ph.D.s and Ed.D.s of Art Education, not Curriculum and Instruction) in North America, only three currently *require* quantitative methods courses. (And by the way, I'm walking the talk, we require two course at NIU.) Some of these programs allow students to choose quantitative methods courses, but such courses not only enable students to make a choice about whether to use such methods in their research, they enable the future professors in the field to read the breadth of research and teach their own students. These courses should be mandatory, not optional.

I understand the several reasons why we have come to this point and the history of reason (particularly critical and feminist theory, which I have worked within) that has led to the rejection of a potentially dangerous paradigm. But, these are new times and those of us who seek to enact a *(post)critical* feminist art education for teacher empowerment are up against greater odds than before. Generally, people also know more than before about the importance of careful and caring consideration when working with quantitative tools.

Feminist critiques of educational leadership argue for relational systems of leadership that attend to context-bound knowledge and flexibly to collectively find or create solutions to problems (Blackmore, 1989). Teacher education is inherently a distributed form of leadership. We need to stand together now in favor of an education appropriate to contemporary art teaching and learning.

One way to do this is to conduct and apply our own quantitative research based on wide-ranging questions and methods, including the empirical methods given credence by groups outside art education.

Perhaps the greatest liberation for our field right now could be the establishment of a culture of research that actually drives our teacher education decision-making and is based on evidence that can be understood outside the field.

Visual Arts-based Research: Refocusing the Feminist Gaze

It is long past time for the feminist gaze to refocus on the hierarchical structures that shape our professional field and create a political community of action. It is time to search for the greatest expertise in art education to study specific areas of need in our field, rather than allowing others to study us (or perhaps worse, to ignore us). Much of that expertise can be found in this room, among you --- the higher educators who have the dedicated time and training to do research and its related work.

Which leads us to the second action item, a serious look at quality in arts-based research. The promise of visual arts-based research is a great opportunity for the field. However, although many people inside our field and out have worked to establish arts-based goals and practices, we still have no communally agreed upon criteria with which to determine quality. As a result of experience, art educators often feel we know when we see good and bad visual arts-based research, but our inability to articulate quality to people outside the field is a

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serious problem for funding, educational programming, and so on.

The standard of practice for judging quality in any research is that it contributes new knowledge to the field, and in the social sciences, such as education, quality is also judged by usefulness. So, we need to discuss the relationship between arts-based research and other research in the field to come up with some agreed upon criteria for assessment.

Partnering: The Example of a Gap in Degree Attainment

The third action item has to do with partnering for research. I expect that everyone here knows that a major limitation of research in our field is a lack of funding sources. Our field tends to fall through the cracks between arts funders and educational funders. And, those of us who have received large federal and foundation grants have found that we must tailor our projects to the interests of the funder.

At present, the best ways to overcome these funding limitations is to develop partnerships, allowing us to broaden our research questions and methods, conduct large-scale studies, and address gaps in knowledge.

Consider this example of a gap in knowledge: the racial and ethnic gap in higher education degree attainment. What does art education have to do with this problem? As Alim states:

The all-too-familiar narrative of racial and ethnic gaps in educational attainment will persist well into the twenty-first century unless “targeted and tailored” strategies are implemented for various underrepresented groups.

That is the message of a forthcoming ETS report titled [“Challenges and Opportunities in National Postsecondary Degree Attainment Goals.”](#)

The groundbreaking report, ... is the first to disaggregate data in order to forecast precisely when and how various groups within the United States will reach national degree attainment goals ... federalized under the Obama administration in 2009.

The [federal goal](#) calls for 60 percent of Americans between the ages of 25 and 34 to have earned a two- or four-year college degree by 2020. ...

The ETS report’s findings show that several minority groups will not only fail to reach these educational benchmarks by the target dates, but won’t do so for many years to come without effective interventions. (Alim, 2017, p.1)

According to the report, it could be 2060 by the time the goal is achieved. That’s two additional generations lost.

For some years, through the research of James Caterall and others, we have had some fairly convincing evidence that art programs help to keep students in high school, which suggests an important connection between art education opportunities and higher education degree attainment. Research in art education could help with the problem of degree attainment and contribute greatly to improving equity outside the field.

As an aside, let me throw this idea into the mix. Based on election research, it appears that the largest group who voted in favor of our current president, did not hold higher education degrees.

So, hypothetically, it is possible that a lack of high school art education could have actually influenced the election. Even if it is difficult to demonstrate a causal relationship, a reasonable hypothesis could be: fewer high school art classes taken by a population is related to greater votes for the current president. This is just a hypothesis, but the point is that we cannot know whether to reject the hypothesis without research. A study of such magnitude would require a partnership between art educators and other researchers outside the field. And, that is the power of partnerships; we can conduct research on a scale that we cannot do alone.

Taking Action:

Partnering, Quantitative Data, Criteria for Arts-Based Research

To conclude, three actions can be taken now:

1. With regards to partnerships, ensuring that our tenure and promotion policies enable and promote publication outside the field could help with partnering, particularly partnering with people in other institutions and disciplines.
2. With regards to quantitative methods, one place to start is our doctoral programs. If you do not currently require quantitative methods courses, please consider making that change. In fact, we should consider requiring upper level quantitative methods courses because quantitative methods has changed and the use of new quantitative methods strategies in mixed

method studies require some training. If we do not prepare our students to read and understand quantitative methods, we are limiting their opportunities for research funding and impact.

3. With regards to arts-based research criteria, I am happy to announce that AERI will host a small gathering of arts-based specialists to review, discuss and debate criteria for visual arts-based research, and hopefully, come to some conclusions that you can all support.

Conclusion

Educational researchers have options. We can complain about the lack of opportunities and funding, or we can change our focus and create opportunities together. It is true that art educators have long been in the defensive position we are in now, but we also have a history of figuring out solutions to problems that make the field stronger.

Frankly, teacher educators have far more influence on teacher education than any single agency. The closest thing we have to a deeply transformational agency, is you, a national and international network of teacher educators. If we want to strengthen art education, we need to strengthen this community and turn it into a research-based, political community, which can ensure the presence and quality of art education as well as communicating to other stakeholders outside the field.

You will have many opportunities to discuss and debate these issues over the next two days. The final panel will be an opportunity to air these discussions

in a whole group forum. Let's plan as a research community and undertake action to support that plan.

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