

## A comparative examination of after-school art programs in the United States and China

### Abstract

The impact and efficacy of after-school art programs have been a topic of interest in the research world for many years in the U.S. Researchers, however, have not reached out to conduct a comparative examination of after-school art programs in the U.S. and China. In fact, art educators in China often inquire as to how American after-school art programs work and what their curricula look like. Therefore, this study analyzes the similarities and differences between after-school art programs in the U.S. and China. It questions what the purpose of after-school art programs is, how after-school art programs affect students, and what their curricula do. This study is conducted through the use of interview analysis. Its goal is to help art educators from the U.S. and China foster greater mutual understanding in regard to their administration of after-school art programs, as well as to improve the management and quality of after-school art programs in China. Finally, it aims to help art educators in China design their curricula to better meet the needs of Chinese students.

### Literature Review

As research from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (2000) shows, in 2000, at least 5 million children in the U.S. came home to empty houses after school because their parents worked outside the home. American parents worry about their children's safety and whether they will be in danger of being exposed to crime or drugs. In order to deal with their concerns, a variety of groups including educators, child development experts, community development groups, and parent groups have created after-school programs to keep children and youth out of trouble (Schwartz & Pace, 2008). However, the report of the after-school protocol task force (2000) shows that there have not been enough quality programs available in order to meet the needs of many parents and students. The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice describe the common elements of high quality after-school programs for school-age students in terms of their goal setting, quality staff, participation ratios, and their attention to safety, health and nutrition issues. After-school programs are becoming an increasingly important part of many students' educational experiences nowadays, and the

arts are beginning to take a prominent place in after-school learning. Alliance (2005) claims that arts-based after-school programs allow for student self-selection based on their individual interests, while also allowing for more opportunities to connect with the community and receive mentorship from professionals. After-school art programs also provide more opportunities for older students to work with younger students. Ersing (2011) asserts that the arts define our culture and are embedded in our history, and that community cultural arts programs help to develop the capacity of youth to contribute to this legacy. Shepard and Booth (2009) demonstrate that “the creation of art can foster a sense of belonging, success, and creativity.” Curricula have been developed to include storytelling, drama, music and dance. Learning about different cultures through art plays a significant role because of its emphasis on diversity and inclusion. It honors differences among people and the children themselves. This is a key point for developing students’ cultural and global awareness. Certainly, after-school art programs have had a good effect on preventing school dropout. As Charmaraman (2011) states, after-school art programs can be critical players in a community’s efforts to prevent school dropout, while simultaneously enhancing students’ learning environment in such a way as to raise student performance.

The report of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (2000) mentions that most after-school programs are sponsored through federal funding and the funding from some companies, including non-profit organizations. However, as Wang (2007) states, most after-school programs in China are established and run by private companies. She believes that after-school art programs will become more and more important for Chinese students while the exam-oriented education meta remains dominant. Many parents link their children’s art studies to their future studies and, particularly, their examinations. Because of their focus on skill-building art education, many blindly fall into utilitarian education modes emphasizing grading and studying. The positive significance of art education is lost in the process of blending with miscellaneous utilitarian colors. Jiang and Chu (2010) claim that various types of after-school art programs are chaotic. The level of art teachers is uneven, and some have not received appropriate education or training. Chinese parents also interfere in the spirit of students’ art education, intervening to redirect their children’s focus away from their spiritual artistic learning and development. As a result, many adverse factors have influenced children’s growth. Chen (2011) demonstrates that after-school programs in China have come to supplement basic K-12 education,

and the tuition cost of these programs often exceeds that of the K-12 education itself. This has become one of China's serious social problems. After-school programs in China have always been seen as a common social phenomenon coexisting with the basic education. According to Chen (2011), the teaching modes in after-school art programs are limited. For example, at times, the teaching mode is out of date. Many art teachers simply give students oral instruction. Students only follow the teacher's orders. This teaching mode has become a stereotyped process of "explain, demonstrate, practice, correct, and practice." In such a context, teachers become the students' masters and students become only passive learners. In this way, the students' thinking is constrained and they are deprived of the opportunity to develop their subjective awareness and initiative. Moreover, some teaching content in after-school art programs is not standardized. Some art teachers use the same teaching materials and the same projects to teach children of differing ages, ignoring whether their curriculum is appropriately tailored to the student's age and psychological state. In addition, some teachers have been eager for quick success in the art teaching process.

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with the increasingly fierce competition for employment in China, after-school programs have sprung up like bamboo shoots after the rain. Currently, the categories of after-school programs have covered all manner of subjects, among them not only the main subjects such as language arts (Chinese literature), math and English, but also such subjects as visual arts, music and even sports. Some researchers agree that after-school programs play an important role in students' study, while others criticize that after-school programs have increased students' burden of study as more and more parents push their children to go to after-school programs.

The American education system has been regarded as the best education system in the Chinese people's perspective for some time. Evidence for this may be found in the continually increasing number of Chinese students coming to study abroad in the U.S. year after year. Currently, many after-school program leaders and administrators in China implement some practices which American after-school programs have done in the past. Some advanced and modern art curricula are introduced and transplanted by their art after-school programs. Zhao (2013) demonstrates that some private companies introduce foreign original textbooks and, at the same time, design their own curriculum according to their real situations, integrating fresh

teaching ideas in their teaching modes. Therefore, private after-school art programs tend to reduce the lag in the development of modern and varied curriculum, while reducing the dependence on outdated or tedious modes of education.

### Research Questions

1. What is the purpose of after-school art programs in the U.S. and in China?
2. What is the position of art in after-school programs in the U.S. and in China?
3. Does art have an effect on students who are taking after-school art classes in the U.S. and in China? How?
4. What are the similarities and differences between art curricula of after-school programs in the U.S. and China?
5. What do after-school art programs in the U.S. and in China emphasize?
6. How do art teachers view their programs and their efficacy in the U.S. and in China?

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