

**The Importance of Photography and Art Education in Secondary Schools: A  
Multifaceted Approach**

By

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**Abstract:**

This essay aims to explore the significance of photography and art education in secondary schools. It emphasizes the multifaceted benefits of integrating these creative disciplines into the curriculum, focusing on the cognitive, emotional, and social development of students. By employing actual research studies, this essay advocates for the inclusion of photography and art education to foster creativity, critical thinking, cultural understanding, and personal growth among secondary school students.

**Introduction:**

Photography and art education have long been recognized as vital components of a well-rounded education. However, in recent years, the focus on standardized testing and core subjects in secondary schools has led to a gradual decline in the presence of these creative disciplines within the curriculum.

Photography and art education are essential in secondary schools as they enhance cognitive development by fostering visual literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills; they support emotional development by promoting self-expression, empathy, and confidence; and they facilitate social development by encouraging collaborative learning, cultural understanding, and social inclusion.

**Cognitive Development**

In an era saturated with visual stimuli, photography has emerged as a prominent medium for communication and expression. Beyond its obvious artistic applications, photography education offers multifaceted benefits, significantly enhancing cognitive development. Exploring this synergy further provides a profound understanding of how the art of capturing light intertwines with the workings of the human mind.

One of the foremost skills that photography education nurtures is an enhanced sense of observation. Photography invites individuals to perceive the world with a keener eye, encouraging them to discern patterns, colors, emotions, and the subtle nuances that one might typically overlook. This heightened sense of observation not only refines an individual's photographic prowess but also broadens their perspective in everyday life.

Together with observation is the cultivation of critical thinking. The journey from novice to proficient photographer is punctuated with the constant evaluation of what distinguishes an impactful photograph from a lackluster one. As photographers scrutinize elements such as lighting, composition, focus, and subject matter, they inadvertently hone their analytical faculties, becoming more judicious and discerning.

Photography is not just an art; it's a sequence of problem-solving events. From contending with inadequate lighting to managing unpredictable subjects, photographers perpetually find themselves in situations demanding quick, innovative solutions. This repeated exercise in problem-solving equips them with the dexterity to navigate a plethora of challenges, both within and outside the realm of photography.

Photography has been found to foster creativity and innovative thinking. A study by Hetland et al. (2007) identified specific thinking skills taught in visual arts classes that are crucial for learning, including observing, envisioning, innovating through exploration, and reflective self-evaluation.

Furthermore, photography integration can also enhance academic achievement in non-art subjects. A longitudinal study by Catterall (2009) found that high school students involved in the arts showed improved performance in mathematics and reading. The study's data demonstrated that students engaged in arts, irrespective of their socio-economic status, often outperformed their non-arts peers in standardized tests.

Another pivotal aspect of photography education is its contribution to visual literacy. As images continue to dominate contemporary communication landscapes, the ability to “read” and interpret them becomes ever more crucial. Photography students, familiar with semiotics and symbolism, possess an enriched understanding of how images serve as conduits for messages and narratives.

Photography also exercises the cognitive muscles responsible for memory and recall. The very act of capturing a moment immortalizes it, aiding in memory retention. Moreover, the periodic revisiting of these images serves as a conduit for reminiscence, fostering a keen sense of recall.

Spatial intelligence is yet another cognitive domain that benefits from photography. As photographers grapple with framing, depth of field, and perspectives, they cultivate a refined understanding of space and its multifarious dimensions.

Photography, while innately creative, also has a pronounced technical dimension. Grasping concepts such as shutter speed, aperture, and ISO, while initially daunting, reinforces logical and sequential thinking, bridging the often perceived chasm between art and science.

However, perhaps one of the most profound impacts of photography is on emotional intelligence. An expressive photograph is often one that captures raw emotion. This necessitates photographers to be deeply attuned to their subjects, understanding, and interpreting subtle cues in facial expressions and body language. Over time, this sensitivity translates into a heightened emotional acumen.

Photography education, while primarily viewed through the lens of art, offers a plethora of cognitive benefits. From refining observation and critical thinking to enhancing emotional intelligence, the art of photography fosters holistic cognitive development, underscoring its invaluable role in education and personal growth.

## **Emotional Development**

In the intricate tapestry of human experience, emotions play a central role, dictating our responses, shaping our memories, and influencing our decisions. Photography, often described as the art of capturing moments, is uniquely positioned to intersect with this emotional landscape. When woven into the fabric of education, photography can play a pivotal role in enhancing emotional development, fostering deeper introspection, empathy, and self-awareness among learners.

At its core, photography is a medium of storytelling. Each image captures not just light and shadow, but emotions, sentiments, and narratives. As students embark on their photographic journey, they learn to tap into their own emotional reservoirs. The act of choosing a subject, deciding on an angle, or even selecting post-processing effects is often guided by the emotions they wish to convey. This constant engagement with their emotional selves fosters self-examination, allowing students to explore and understand their own feelings and reactions in different scenarios.

Furthermore, photography serves as a mirror to the broader world, reflecting diverse cultures, lifestyles, and emotions. As students capture images of various subjects, from the euphoria of a celebration to the desolation of poverty, they are exposed to a gamut of emotions. This exposure nurtures empathy. By viewing the world through their subjects' eyes, students learn to appreciate and understand feelings different from their own. Over time, this emotional connection can break down barriers, enabling students to approach life with a more open and understanding heart.

Self-expression is another invaluable aspect of photography. Often, emotions are complex, abstract, and challenging to articulate in words. Photography provides students with an alternative language, one that speaks through visuals. By capturing images that resonate with their feelings, students learn to externalize their emotions, leading to better emotional

processing and communication. This not only enhances emotional intelligence but also provides a therapeutic outlet for emotional release.

Photography education's impacts extend to social and emotional development. A review by Deasy (2002) highlighted various studies indicating that students involved in arts programs exhibit better self-confidence, empathy, and resilience. By providing a channel for expression and a context for collaboration, arts education fosters personal and social skills essential for well-rounded development.

Art education has a profound impact on marginalized communities. A report by the National Endowment for the Arts (2011) emphasized that at-risk youth engaged in arts activities showed increased academic achievements, school engagement, and civic participation. Art programs provide unique opportunities for personal growth, allowing students to connect with cultural roots and articulate their unique voices.

Moreover, the feedback loop in photography education – where students present their work and receive critiques – allows for emotional resilience to be built. Handling criticism, especially related to personal creations, can be tough. Yet, in navigating this landscape of feedback, students cultivate the ability to accept, process, and grow from critiques, enhancing their emotional maturity.

Furthermore, photography fosters emotional intelligence. Through activities like painting, drama, and dance, students can explore and express their emotions. As per a study conducted by Bowen, Greene, and Kisida (2014), arts educational experiences have meaningful effects on students' social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes. Participating in art activities provides students with tools to better understand themselves and navigate their emotional landscapes.

Photography education also plays a pivotal role in instilling a sense of individuality and self-worth. In a society where standardization often takes precedence, art offers a counter-narrative.

The process of creating art is deeply personal, helping students understand that their unique perspectives hold value. A report by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (2011) emphasized that arts education fosters young innovators, helping them think creatively and become leaders of the next generation.

Moreover, in an era dominated by digital interaction, the tactile and hands-on nature of many art disciplines offers a refreshing break. Engaging in physical art-making processes, whether it's sculpting clay or sketching on paper, has therapeutic benefits. According to Malchiodi (2012), art-making can be a form of sensory-based intervention, promoting relaxation and reducing anxiety.

Lastly, the shared experiences in photography classes – be it group projects, exhibitions, or even field trips – create a sense of camaraderie. Engaging in collective emotional experiences, celebrating peers' successes, or even consoling each other in moments of disappointment, enriches the emotional depth of students, teaching them the value of emotional support and connection.

Photography education does more than just teach the mechanics of using a camera; it lays the foundation for profound emotional growth. Through self-examination, empathy, self-expression, resilience, and community engagement, students not only become better photographers but also emotionally evolved individuals. As educators and proponents of holistic growth, it is essential to recognize and champion the invaluable role photography plays in emotional development.

## **Social Development**

In the halls of secondary education, amidst the growing minds and evolving identities, the role of holistic learning has never been more emphasized. While traditional subjects lay the foundation of academic rigor, it's in the arts, particularly photography, where students find avenues for nuanced social development. Photography education, often underestimated in its potential, serves as a potent tool in fostering critical social skills, nurturing collaboration, and promoting a broader understanding of diverse societal contexts.

The classroom environment in photography education naturally fosters teamwork. Students collaborate on projects, exchange feedback, and sometimes share equipment or assist in setting up shots. These interactions require them to communicate effectively, negotiate roles, and work towards a collective goal. Through these activities, secondary school students develop essential social skills such as active listening, cooperation, and conflict resolution.

Additionally, photography provides students with a unique platform to express their identity, views, and feelings. As teenagers navigate the unsettled years of adolescence, searching for their voice and place in the world, photography offers an outlet. Sharing their work with peers not only fosters self-confidence but also encourages respectful discourse. When a student presents a photo highlighting issues like climate change, racial inequality, or cultural celebrations, it often sparks conversations. These dialogues, born from a single image, allow students to engage in discussions on varied topics, promoting tolerance and broadening their horizons.

Furthermore, the diverse range of subjects within photography education prompts students to step out of their comfort zones. Whether it's capturing the essence of their local community or delving into the intricacies of portraiture, students interact with diverse individuals and settings. These engagements promote cultural sensitivity, empathy, and a genuine curiosity about the world around them, fostering a more inclusive mindset.



Another overlooked aspect of photography education is the exhibitions and showcases. These events, often culminating a semester's hard work, provide students with the opportunity to showcase their perspectives and narratives. Engaging with a broader audience, be it their peers, teachers, or the community, students learn the value of networking, public speaking, and receiving feedback. Such experiences prepare them for various social situations they'll encounter later in life.

Lastly, in an era dominated by social media, photography education equips students with skills to navigate this digital social landscape responsibly. They learn about the ethics of sharing images, the impact of visuals on societal perceptions, and the nuances of digital communication. This understanding ensures they evolve as responsible digital citizens, enhancing their social adaptability in a connected world.

Photography education in secondary schools is not merely an artistic endeavor, but a journey that molds students while preparing them for a complex social environment. Through collaboration, discourse, cultural engagement, public showcases, and digital responsibility, students don't just learn to take pictures; they learn to interact, engage, and enrich their social worlds. As educators and policymakers, it's imperative to recognize and harness the transformative power of photography in nurturing socially adept future generations.

### **Photography Education: A Foundation for Holistic Development**

Photography education is not simply an extra-curricular indulgence; it's a vital aspect of overall human development. While the focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) subjects remains strong, there is growing evidence that incorporating arts into the educational system is equally vital.

The concept of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics) has been advocated by several educators and researchers, highlighting the interconnectedness of arts

with traditional STEM subjects. The Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) has actively promoted the addition of 'Art' to STEM, emphasizing that creativity and design thinking are fundamental to innovation and problem-solving in science and technology fields. From fostering creativity to enhancing academic achievement, building social skills, and promoting inclusivity, the arts are integral to a comprehensive educational system. Recognizing the importance of arts education ensures that students are provided with the tools necessary for success in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

One of the most significant benefits of art classes is the cultivation of cultural appreciation and a broader world perspective. Photography and art programs provide students with the opportunity to engage with different cultures and historical contexts, fostering a sense of interconnectedness. As Eisner (2002) highlighted, “the arts allow students to enter the worlds of those from different times and places, nurturing empathy and understanding in an increasingly globalized world”.

In the larger picture, photography education also serves as a tool for community engagement. Schools that actively involve students in community art projects not only enhance the aesthetics of neighborhoods but also instill a sense of responsibility and community pride among students.

The educational community is made richer and more vibrant with the inclusion of photography. It is more than just a subject; it's a mode of understanding the world and our place in it. For holistic development, educators and policymakers must ensure that art education remains integral to curricula, cultivating not just learned individuals but also empathetic, creative, and responsible citizens.

### **Potential Challenges and Limitations**

While there may be challenges associated with implementing photography and art education, such as the need for specialized resources and facilities, academic research suggest that these challenges can be addressed through creative solutions, collaboration with community partners,

and leveraging existing resources. Furthermore, the long-term benefits of providing students with access to creative outlets outweigh the initial hurdles.

Some schools are getting creative on how to overcome these barriers. Milton High School out of Milton, Vermont is developing an Innovation Center (will be referred as the MIC for the remainder of this essay) in which students learn how to dream, design, and build. Based on the mission of this center, Milton High School wants to help students by creating a flexible, hands-on space for students to explore, create, and innovate their passions into a career path with the collaboration and mentorship of educators and community professionals. Photography education is part of this center which in turn is the connection between the arts and science. For example, students last year developed a pin-hole camera just like Ansel Adams did in the earlier part of the century. Students not only explored the earlier parts of photography, but they worked as a team to dream, design, and build a working prototype. They then interwoven their chemistry class into using chemicals to develop their film and then display their finished photographs. At the end of the endeavor, their photographs were on display at the annual “Milton Art Night” where community members came to listen to their presentation.

### **Addressing Financial Constraints**

Some may argue that limited funding in schools makes it difficult to allocate resources to photography and art education. However, there are cost-effective strategies, such as integrating art into existing subjects, utilizing open-source software, and partnering with local art organizations, can mitigate financial constraints. Investing in photography and art education not only enriches the educational experience but also contributes to the overall development of students.

Milton High school has seen first hand that art education is important to student growth and development so has allocated much resources into those programs. Teachers are encouraged to use Marzano’s New Taxonomy (not to be confused with Bloom’s Taxonomy) to foster these 3 main ideas outlined by Dubas, 2016:

1. Self-system. The self-system considers the beliefs about the importance of knowledge, beliefs about efficacy, and emotions associated with knowledge.
2. Metacognitive system. The metacognitive system focuses on specifying learning goals, monitoring the execution of knowledge, monitoring clarity, and monitoring accuracy.
3. Cognitive system (which is somewhat similar to Bloom's lower and higher-order thinking framework). The cognitive system is broken down into four areas: knowledge retrieval, comprehension, analysis, and knowledge utilization.

By utilizing this system, Milton was able to see the connection between art and education and teachers are given the financial resources to do so. They are also able to use the innovation center as needed to strengthen their curriculum.

### **Addressing Curriculum Overload Concerns**

Critics may argue that incorporating photography and art education into an already packed curriculum adds burden and reduces focus on core subjects. However, by seeing the importance of the interdisciplinary nature of photography and art education, demonstrating how these disciplines can be integrated with other subjects to enhance learning outcomes. Additionally, research suggests that creative expression and critical thinking fostered through photography and art can positively impact academic achievement in other domains.

### **Conclusion**

Photography and art education play a crucial role in the holistic development of secondary school students. Photography and art education enhance cognitive development, emotional well-being, and social skills, fostering creativity, critical thinking, cultural understanding, and personal growth. While challenges exist, reducing these programs is not the answer. It is imperative for secondary schools to recognize the importance of photography and art education and take proactive steps to integrate these disciplines into their educational programs. By doing so, schools can create an inclusive and enriching environment that empowers students to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially.

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