Teacher Perceptions of Arts Integration into General Education Curriculum

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Teacher Perceptions of Arts Integration into
General Education Curriculum

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Abstract

In elementary schools, art is often taught as a supplement to general education, and is frequently separated from academic subjects with “pullout programs.” However, incorporating arts into the general education classroom, and into academic subjects, can potentially have positive outcomes such as allowing students to broaden their conceptions of the world, and themselves, and make authentic connections across disciplines. The purpose of this research study was to examine teacher reports of the frequency and quality of arts integration into general education curriculum, as well as what teachers perceived to be its perceived benefits or drawbacks. Thirty-one educators associated with a large university in the northeast United States completed a survey. The educators are special educators, specials teachers (educators who facilitate pullout programs for the arts, languages, or physical education), and classroom teachers. Most participants indicated that they saw the need for arts integration in general education curricula, although many described feeling constraints from district or curriculum requirements. Results show that most educators view the arts as beneficial for students’ cognitive retention of material, understanding of material, or emotional intelligence.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Often in elementary schools, art is taught as a supplement to general education curricula, and is taught separately from academic subjects such as mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies. Traditionally, elementary school students were only exposed to art through “pullout programs” (McKean & Sudol, 2002). However, incorporating arts into the general education classroom, and into core subjects, can potentially have positive outcomes. Students who learn with an integrated approach are often inspired to broaden their conceptions of the world, and themselves, and to obtain and use knowledge in an authentic way (Brand & Triplett, 2012). “A common thread that permeates national reform efforts stresses the need to integrate, or make connections among, the different areas of the curriculum” (Duran, Duran, & Worch, 2009, p. 19). In my research, I studied teachers’ perceptions of the benefits of arts integration for students.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

In my literature review, I will explain the literature related to authentic learning, interdisciplinary pedagogy, and arts integration.

**Authentic Learning**

Althauser and Harter (2016) claimed that authentic learning is an approach that can allow students to see value in their learning, develop a greater chance of recalling what they learned, and gain cognitive access to the meaning behind the concepts. They wrote, “Meaningful, relevant lessons are taught at a higher intellectual level and contain information and skills that are of value beyond school to bolster student achievement” (p. 113). They asserted that learning should be age appropriate and relevant, culturally responsive, and interesting to students, and concepts should be explicit.

Students who learn from an integrated focus are more likely to expand their conceptions of the world and themselves, and to gain knowledge authentically (Brand & Triplett, 2012). “The curriculum that divides children’s learning into separate discrete disciplines does an injustice to the child” (Bogan, King-McKenzie, & Bantwini, 2012, p. 1054). “Learning outcomes are enhanced for all learners when instruction is anchored in rich and meaningful contexts and relevance to the real world can be perceived” (Althauser & Harter, 2016, p. 112).

Authentic instruction promotes student achievement through disciplined inquiry, the construction of knowledge, and learning that is valuable beyond school contexts (Althauser & Harter, 2016). All students have different interests, strengths and needs, and their learning can be enhanced if their teachers create natural connections among subjects (Carrier, Gray, Wiebe, & Teachout, 2011).
Interdisciplinary Pedagogy

Interdisciplinary teaching is the combination of two or more subjects in an authentic, real-world way. Integration connects subjects authentically to the real world, keeping in mind students’ interests and allowing for inquiry and use of problem-solving skills (Bogan, King-McKenzie, & Bantwini, 2012). According to constructivist theory, students actively create knowledge through their experiences (Brand & Triplett, 2012). This places the student at the center of decision making, with the teacher taking a backseat, but can still scaffold when students need guidance (Brand & Triplett, 2012). Students already have their own ideas and knowledge when they enter a classroom, and teachers need to build their instruction off of these ideas (Brand & Triplett, 2012). Often, splitting disciplines into unique, separated areas is unnatural and inauthentic, which can put students at a disservice, in that their education is not grounded in real-world evidence (Bogan, King-McKenzie, & Bantwini, 2012). However, incorporating arts into curricula may be a solution to this problem. Arts occur naturally in the real world, and having teachers incorporate them into traditionally separate disciplines would not only be logical but could encourage authentic thinking and learning. Integration lets students make natural and meaningful connections between disciplines and in the real world (Bogan, King-McKenzie, & Bantwini, 2012; Duran et al., 2009; Carrie, et al., 2011; Lackey & Huxhold, 2016). Teaching with an interdisciplinary approach can add relevance and significance to what is being taught and learned, leading to an increase of knowledge in content areas (Duran et al., 2009). Students may also become more motivated and engaged in learning, think critically and analytically, gain independence and confidence, and feel supported by teachers and their school (Lackey & Huxhold, 2016).
Interdisciplinary teaching is not just a way of organizing subjects and instruction, but also a way to think about the goals of schools, curriculum resources, and how information is used (Brand & Triplett, 2012). Research on integrated curricula suggests that students’ learning is enhanced with interdisciplinary learning, and this approach goes along with the research that suggests that people learn through connections and patterns (Duran et al., 2009; Brand & Triplett, 2012).

**Arts Integration**

Arts integration can be defined as using visual, dramatic, or musical representation as a form of teaching within other core curricula (Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskaya, & Hardiman, 2011). Incorporating art into the general education classroom may help elementary school teachers to teach in more authentic, real world and engaging ways.

Harlin and Brown stated that the arts are an essential part of life, connecting people within and between cultures. When arts are included in various subjects, students can better comprehend many disciplines. The arts encourage creativity, expression, and originality in students (Harlin & Brown, 2007). Harlin and Brown (2007) argued that current teaching approaches often involve the “fragmentation of knowledge,” meaning that teachers instruct certain subjects separately at different times of day. Carrier et al. (2011) stated that the traditional separation and creation of unique disciplines does not allow students to make connections among the subjects taught in school and their daily lives.

**Examples of Integration**

Duran et al. and colleagues (2009) successfully combined science, language arts, and visual arts using a papier-mâché project, allowing students to create artistic representations of animals from fictional texts. Carrier et al. (2011) combined biology and music authentically
through lessons about sound. McKean and Sudol (2010) combined writing and drama in a fifth-grade classroom, to examine how the dramatic arts affected students’ writing.

**Purpose and Methods for Integration**

Burger and Winner (2000) hypothesize that the skills required for reading can be enhanced through exposure to visual arts. Reading requires visual and motivational skills that can be taught through art. Other research has shown that curricula that combine language and visual arts are highly beneficial to and successful for teaching urban students (Short, 2001). Short (2001) demonstrated that critical thinking associated with examining art is similar to the skills needed in analyzing writing. This suggests that there is a natural connection between visual arts and reading-based subjects.

Several scholars have discussed different approaches to incorporating the arts into general education classrooms (Harlin & Brown, 2007; Rinne, et al., 2011). Harlin and Brown (2007) specified three ways to integrate art into the curriculum. The “subservient approach” superficially incorporates the arts into another subject area, ignoring the goals of both the discipline and the arts. “Interdisciplinary learning” combines art and other disciplines, focusing on the arts, specifically. “Coequal cognitive integration” requires teachers to be trained in all subject areas (Harlin & Brown, 2007). Rinne et al. (2011), on the other hand, provided a model of two different ways to incorporate arts into classrooms. One approach is to incorporate the teaching and practice of art skills and knowledge into non-art domains to the benefit of arts. The other approach is to use the arts to help students learn habits and dispositions. Both of Rinne et al.’s (2011) approaches seem to fall under interdisciplinary learning as defined by Harlin and Brown (2007). Duran et al. (2009) identified several ways for curricula to be integrated. In one approach, the teacher emphasized that a single subject can carry into other disciplines. In another
approach, students conduct the integration by combining resources from different subjects in and out of school.

*Obstacles to Adopting an Interdisciplinary Approach*

Carrier et al. (2011) defined some obstacles that emerge with an interdisciplinary approach. First, many teachers specialize in a specific subject, which means that they are not trained to teach a wide range of disciplines. Time is also a concern for teachers. Since meeting curriculum standards is often a district priority, they may feel pressure to focus only on standardized-tested subjects (Carrier et al., 2011).

*Conclusion*

While the arts are commonly taught separately from traditional subjects, arts integration in elementary schools may potentially have positive outcomes. Students may be able to learn in more authentic contexts, allowing them to make meaningful connections between school and the real world. While there are obstacles that go along with arts integration, the potential benefits are great. To further our understanding of these integrations, I will examine their perceptions of benefits and drawbacks for students, as well as how some teachers integrate arts into their classroom.
Chapter 3: Methods

I used a qualitative survey to ask elementary school, middle school, and high school teachers about their perceptions of arts integration into general education curricula. The data were collected to aid in answering the following questions:

1. How regularly do teachers state they integrate the arts into their classrooms?
2. How do teachers feel about arts integration?
3. Why do some teachers choose to include arts integration and some do not?
4. Are teachers aware of any benefits of arts integration?

Participants

The 31 teachers included in this survey were invited from a larger group of teachers who are affiliated with a large public university in the Northeast United States. These teachers work in rural, urban, and suburban school districts. The educators are cooperating teachers for college juniors, student teachers, and master’s interns, all of whom are enrolled in the university.

Of the 31 participants, 8 are in special education or resource classrooms, 1 teaches Spanish, 1 teaches physical education, 7 teach music/band/orchestra, 1 teaches student teachers, and 13 are classroom teachers. Of the 31 participants, 13 teach fifth through twelfth grade and 18 teach pre-school to fifth grade.

Instruments

I developed the survey to learn educators’ perceptions of arts integration. The first section of the survey asked the educators what grade(s) they teach and their subject area. It also asked teachers about the frequency of their own arts integration in the classroom.

Section II had ten Likert Scale questions about teachers’ arts integration practices, with five options ranging from false (1) to true (5).
Section III asked educators to reflect on the art used in their classrooms, the subjects into which they incorporate the arts, art materials available in their classrooms, student accessibility to the materials, frequency of specials (pullout programs for the arts), and the kinds of specials students attend.

Section IV asked the educators open-ended questions about their own integration practices as well as their opinions about arts integration.

Procedure

Participants were asked via email to participate in the approximately fifteen-minute survey. I assured them that the results would be confidential, and they did not disclose any personal information that would make them easily identifiable, such as name or school district.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the Likert Scale data by creating graphs and charts showing the frequency of the answers. I also found the standard deviation, median and mode for each Section II question.

I analyzed the qualitative data by coding the prose writing and sorting the answers by similarity of the content. I made different categories and counted how many people discussed each topic. Some educators wrote about more than one listed topic in each question.

Limitations

One limitation of this survey was the small population of participants. Another limitation is that all of the participants live in the same Northeastern state, in the same general area. My sample only reflects the thoughts and opinions of this very small group of people.
Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I will report the results I found from the survey explained in Chapter 3.

Section I

Of the 31 participants, 29% stated that they incorporated the arts into their classrooms daily, 19% stated that they incorporated the arts into their classrooms weekly, 10% stated that they incorporated the arts into their classrooms biweekly, 29% stated that they incorporated the arts into their classrooms monthly, and 13% stated that they never incorporate the arts into their classrooms (Figure 1). Eight out of nine participants who stated that they incorporate the arts into their classrooms daily teach specials/facilitate pullout programs. Three of the four educators who stated that they never incorporate the arts into their classrooms teach special education, and the fourth is a student teaching supervisor.

Figure 1

A plurality of participants (26%) stated that incorporating the arts into their classrooms is somewhat hard. Of the seven participants who stated that it was easy, six were specials teachers. Of the four participants who stated that incorporating the arts into their classrooms is hard, two are special educators, one is a student teaching supervisor, and one is a classroom teacher.
Section II

In this section, educators were asked about their opinions about arts integration, with Likert Scale questions (1 = false, 2 = somewhat false, 3 = neither true nor false, 4 = somewhat true, 5 = true).

Table 1

Section II Survey Questions and Answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Number</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>7. When I am integrating the arts into academic materials, I have my</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students work from models to create art.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>10. When I am integrating the arts into academic materials, I give my</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students freedom to choose and create their own art.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>11. I think students can recall information better when the arts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>are incorporated into academic material.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>12. I think students enjoy academic subjects more when the arts</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>are incorporated into academic material.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>13. I enjoy academic subjects more when the arts are incorporated</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>into academic material.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
14. The arts do not affect my students.  
   1  1.5  0.75

15. I enjoy incorporating the arts in my classroom.  
   5  4.18  1.09

16. I do not have time to incorporate the arts in my classroom.  
   3  2.75  1.27

17. Pressure from curriculum standards prevents me from incorporating the arts.  
   4  3.18  1.36

Note: The questions are listed in the order that was presented to participants, and all questions are present.

The mode score (most common score) for question 7 was four, meaning that the educators mostly have their students use models to create art, ergo not making their own creations. However, in question 10, the mode score was also four, meaning that the educators stated that they mostly give their students freedom to choose and create their own art.

The question with the highest standard deviation was question 17. This indicates that the educators’ opinions vary the most for this question. While the mode was 4, the average was 3.18 and the standard deviation was 1.36, indicating that there was a wide range of answers. This indicates that while many teachers feel curriculum constraints,

**Section III**

This section describes how educators said that they incorporate the arts into their classrooms. I gave the educators various options for each question, they selected all that applied.
Question 22: In my classroom, a form of art used is…

Most educators stated that they incorporate drawing into their classrooms more than any other form of the arts. Many educators stated that they incorporate music into their classrooms. It is important to note that the educators who listed dance as a form of the arts are all music teachers.

Question 23: I incorporate the arts into…

All but four educators indicated that they incorporate the arts into at least one subject (four state that arts incorporation is not applicable). Educators indicated that they incorporate the arts into reading more than any other subject.

Question 24: In my classroom, I have…
Almost all of the educators indicated that they have construction paper, colored pencils, markers, and crayons. Significantly fewer educators have other materials, such as for music, drama, and sculpture.

Question 25: Students have access to the materials listed above…

While most educators have materials in their classrooms, nearly all of them only give their students access during certain times and when the students are told. While 20 educators have arts materials in their rooms, less than half use the materials as a part of authentic arts integration and academic learning.

Question 20: My students attend specials for…
Most students attend specials for music and visual arts. Also, while many educators did not write that students attend specials for dance or drama, many of the music educators indicated that they integrate both into their teaching.

Question 21: How many times per week do your students attend specials for music, dance, drama, and/or visual arts per week?

Section IV

In this section, I present the results of educators’ answers to open-ended questions about their own perceptions of arts integration. The educators may have written more than one of each code in their responses. Each code is organized from most frequently written in the responses to least frequently. Please note that all of the descriptions of the codes are the opinions of the educators who participated. Their own language is incorporated into the descriptions.

Question 26: In what ways can arts integration benefit students?
Through analysis, I coded the responses I into the following categories, with the number of people who wrote about them in parentheses, followed by a brief description of each category, according to the educators who wrote about them:

Student engagement (12) – students are more likely to be engaged in their learning with arts integration. I included two educators’ responses that discussed multisensory learning in this category, because they stated that the multisensory learning engages students.

Expression and emotion (8) – students can express their own emotions and thought processes better. One educator stated, “Some students express their thinking better when drawing or role playing is involved.”

Cognitive retention (5) – students recall and remember material with more accuracy

Creativity (5) – students are able to come up with their own ideas and thoughts, documenting them in unique ways

Better understanding of material (4) – students are able to comprehend material

Interdisciplinary learning (4) – the arts are combined into different subjects to enhance student learning. For example, one educator incorporates reader’s theater and drama into reading, in order to increase and activate student learning.

Helps different learners (3) – the arts help visual learners, as well as students who have some difficulty with academic subjects

Learning cultural perspectives (2) – two educators, one Spanish and one social studies, indicated that the arts help students to learn various perspectives

Not for everyone (1) – some students do not respond positively to the arts
Question 27: Why do you choose or choose not to integrate the arts into your academic instruction?

I coded the responses into various sub-categories, all of which fall into the following two groups: 1) choose to integrate and 2) choose not to integrate.

I sorted the responses within the “choose to integrate” category into these groups:

Art is meaningful, authentic, and interdisciplinary (7)

Visuals help learning (3): there are many different kinds of learners in a given class, and visuals help students gain access to academic learning

Art is important and enjoyable (2): students enjoy the arts

Art leads to inquiry (1): this educator believes that the arts allow students to ask more questions in order to learn

Art helps with expression (1)

I sorted the responses within the “choose not to integrate” category into these groups:

Curriculum or time demands (12): these educators indicated that they do not have the time to incorporate the arts

No access to space or materials (2): both of these educators are special educators who either do not have materials or do not have their own classrooms

Do not know how to (2): these educators do not know how to integrate the arts

Distraction to other students (1): some students can get distracted if other students are using the arts, or can get caught up in the arts rather than the academic material

Question 28: How do your students react when you incorporate the arts into other academic subject areas and materials?
I coded the responses into the following categories:

- Students love the arts (11)
- Some students like it, others do not (5)
- Students are engaged and motivated (4)
- Students feel unable to be creative and do not like the arts (3)
- Students enjoy performing (3): these educators indicated that their students like drama and music, and the performances that go with it
- Students remember better (2): students have better cognitive retention with the arts
- Students love investigating and questioning (1)

**Question 29:** What benefit of arts integration have you seen for your own students?

I sorted the responses into the following categories:

- Interdisciplinary learning (6)
- Students are engaged and motivated (6)
- Better memory (4)
- Connections to emotions (3)
- Creativity and expression (3)
- Students do better with the arts (3): students are more successful with their academic learning
- Children can communicate with others (2): the students use the arts to discuss academics with others
- Students understand other cultures and views (2)
- Students become more confident (1)
Students can collaborate with others (1)

Question 30: What professional development have you had (if any) with arts integration?

Twelve participants stated that they have had no professional development, three have had professional development on drama, and five had had other forms of development at various universities in the northeast United States.
Chapter 5: Discussion

While many educators indicated their beliefs that arts integration is beneficial and important for students, many also do not incorporate the arts into their classrooms as much as they might like. Many teachers agreed that arts integration can be used as a means for teaching, however sometimes curriculum and district demands or requirements prohibit them from using the arts.

I noticed from the data that many specials teachers (music, Spanish, or physical education) use different forms of the arts to teach, aside from their specific subject area, and they pay close attention to interdisciplinary approaches. For example, a music teacher stated that they incorporate math themes, such as geometry and patterns, into learning.

This research indicates that teachers should continue to incorporate the arts into their classrooms because there are many perceived benefits that can have a major positive impact on student learning and success, which echoes the research discussed in the literature review.

Limitations

One major limitation is the sample. The response rate was low; 40 people began the survey, 31 people answered questions, and 25 people answered every question. This, along with the fact that all of the participants are from one area (a northeastern state) and are all affiliated with a university, limits my ability to draw conclusions beyond the specific individuals who responded.

In addition, while this study is about arts integration into general education curricula, many of the participants are specials teachers (facilitators of pullout programs) or special education teachers. The study was also exploratory and did not have a piloting process prior to distribution.
Future Research

Future research can be conducted to explore more about specials teachers incorporating different forms of the arts. Research can also involve learning more about special educators’ perceptions of the arts. Most of the special educators who participated in this research indicated that they do not incorporate the arts into their own teaching, and some stated that they do not have access to art materials. It would be interesting to learn more about what prevents these educators from integrating the arts, especially since a lot of research indicates that the arts are beneficial for many different kinds of learners.

While the participants in this study mostly agree that the arts are beneficial, it is unclear how authentic their arts integration is. Research could be conducted to explore more about the authenticity of the integration. For example, a craft project in which students draw pictures of characters in a book is not as authentic as teaching students how to use story boards to create their own stories, as it is a skill that can help them in the real world. Further exploration into this topic would be beneficial to arts integration research.

Research could also be conducted to learn more about student perceptions of the arts. In addition, researchers can find out more about how the arts affect students’ learning and cognitive retention of material.
References


