

Infusing visual and performing arts into the curriculum adds critical components to educating the whole child.

Maureen Reilly Lorimer



Using Interdiscipli Arts Educat to Enhance



nary ion Learning

Amid the crossing currents of educational expectations pressing on principals, one question must be prominent on their “to do” lists: How can I enhance the inclusion of the visual and performing arts at my school? Although electives and clubs provide arts exposure to a selected few, many students do not receive consistent and high-quality arts experiences (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). However, when carefully planned, interdisciplinary arts education has the potential to provide a relevant and developmentally responsive curriculum (i.e., a curriculum that engages the physical, social, and cognitive needs) that ultimately enhances learning for all.

Drawing from a body of research, including a recent study of middle-level schools, this article presents strategies and benefits related to using interdisciplinary arts education as a foundation for presenting the visual and performing arts as integral components in educating the whole child.

Infusing Arts Into the Curriculum

Although the No Child Left Behind Act mandates the visual and performing arts as core subjects, most schools offer scant exposure to them. In her extensive review of the status of elementary arts education, Chapman (2005) suggests that some “initiatives for improvement call for integrating the arts into the academic curriculum.”

By weaving the visual arts, music, dance, and drama into other content areas, interdisciplinary arts experiences have the potential to enhance student learning in authentic and meaningful ways. Longitudinal studies cite the

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development of critical thinking, analytical thinking, and problem-solving skills as integral components of interdisciplinary arts experiences (Longley, 1999; Stevenson & Deasy, 2005). Whether creating or playing music, performing in a play or dance, or designing art, thinking skills are activated. For example, students involved in art often transfer written text to a visual image or symbolic representation. Exploring the details of conceptual themes such as slavery, immigration, and world cultures

are enriched through the visual and performing arts.

Reinforcing comprehension of abstract concepts (Gay, 2000), enhancement of engagement, meaning-making, and reasoning abilities (Diket, 2003), and opportunities for personal expression (Bernard, 2004) are also positive outcomes derived from using the visual and performing arts with other content areas. For example, an eighth-grade math teacher who had his students “acting out” fractions found that although all students benefited from this experience, one student in particular “mastered the concept that had totally baffled her only a short time earlier” (Gay, 2000).

An interdisciplinary arts unit entitled The Jerusalem Architecture Project (Wolf & Balick, 1999) required students to use creative and critical thinking skills to develop a scale model of a new building that would be placed in the center of Jerusalem. To accomplish this, students had to consider the history of the city and the various cultural, religious, and political backgrounds of its citizens. They also had to contemplate the future needs of the community, prepare a rationale for their building, and present this proposal to a mock planning committee. The depth and breadth of skills developed throughout this unit, including architectural drawing, proposal writing, and research gathering resulted in a sophisticated learning experience.

Benefiting From Arts Integration

More recently, a comparison of observation and interview data from 13 middle-level classrooms that infuse visual and performing arts into their language arts, social studies, science, and math curricula (Lorimer, 2007) revealed that the arts were also used in other curricular areas, most often with visual arts, sometimes with theater and music, and occasionally with dance/movement activities.

Surprisingly, teacher motivation was perceived as an added benefit, with most participants stating that the arts bring joy into the classroom. Teacher

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and administrator interviews also indicate that integrated or interdisciplinary arts education was considered a positive catalyst for personal, social, and academic growth. Several teachers noticed that arts activities increased student motivation and that students involved in interdisciplinary projects, such as a Nile River map, an illustrated science vocabulary, or a medieval play, tended to work closely with their peers.

When asked about the academic benefits they see resulting from interdisciplinary arts education, several teachers stated that arts-infused learning increased attention to detail and persistence. They also noticed improved test scores, better retention of information, and enhanced critical thinking resulting from “learning by doing.”

Strategies to Support Interdisciplinary Learning

There are many strategies that may enhance a relevant and developmentally responsive interdisciplinary curriculum. For example, *visual scanning* can be implemented in any classroom at any level. To begin, a teacher will select an art print or artifact for viewing. After one minute of quiet observation, students begin responding to and posing questions about the artwork/artifact. As the discussion progresses, the teacher can pose questions that prompt deeper thinking (“What else do you see?” “How do you know?” “What evidence may support that?”). In this way, all the students are allowed to share what they see and think.

Extensions to this strategy can be applied when listening to a musical composition (“What do you hear?”) or when observing a dance or theatrical production. Students also can craft their own interpretation of what they have observed by writing a first-person narrative from the perspective of the artist or a figure in the artwork, or creating a poem or script. In science, students can use this technique to observe and describe cells, motion, or chemical reactions and then draw or write their observational experiences in an artistic manner.

Blind contour drawing is another effective tool that can be integrated into many curricular areas. Perceptive observation skills are emphasized throughout this activity, in which students are asked to draw the outline of a subject without looking at the paper. To begin, students observe the object for about 60 seconds. Then, they pick a focal point at the edge of the object to begin drawing a continuous line, without lifting their pencils and with their eyes focused on the object. When finished, students may find some aspects of their drawings to be disproportionate, while others may be quite accurate. This technique can support lab drawings in science and geometric figures in math. Blind contour drawing is an excellent tool for developing hand-eye coordination, strengthening observation skills, and enhancing learning.

An Action Plan for Principals

Although many principals would like to infuse the visual and performing arts into classroom instruction, most are limited by lack of time or knowledge, as well as their primary concerns about meeting mandated curriculum standards. However, principals can enhance arts-infused learning through advocacy and faculty support. For example, a principal can support collaboration by classroom teachers and arts specialists through release time, prep time, or curricular planning days (California Alliance for Arts Education, 2005; Stevenson & Deasy, 2005; Woodworth et al., 2007). This collaboration can result in the planning of rich and engaging units of learning that infuse the visual and performing arts in authentic and meaningful ways.

Moreover, rethinking the concept of time is critical. Because the notion of “there’s never enough time” regularly permeates many educators’ conversation and way of thinking, reconceptualizing this challenge may bring about positive results.

Two key factors are required for arts education success: an arts-minded philosophy and strong leadership skills.



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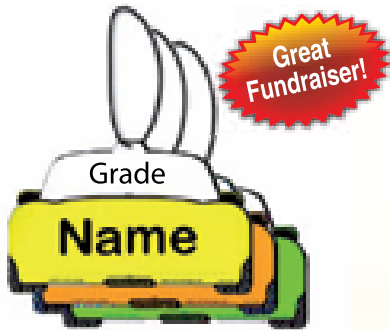
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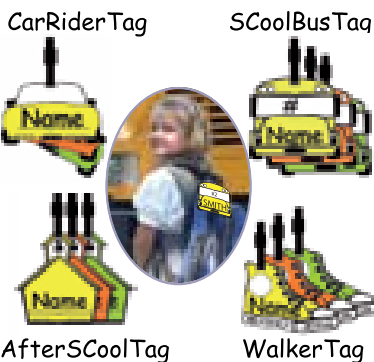
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The participating administrators in the Lorimer (2007) middle school study openly stated that they were supportive of interdisciplinary arts education. Moreover, each exemplified this support through his or her actions. Principals must be proactive in developing an implementation plan and marshaling resources to support the arts throughout the school community.

Although research findings provide compelling evidence to validate the benefits of arts education, this continues to be one of the most neglected areas of the curriculum. The replacement of arts electives with remedial and intervention courses, lack of adequate funding, and the emphasis on discrete subject matter prevent many principals from even considering creative or alternative arts-based approaches to learning and teaching (Woodworth et al., 2007). But while the demands of state standards and requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act continue to weigh heavily on the minds of most educators, it is imperative to consider that in striving to close racial and achievement gaps in mathematics and reading, "we run the risk of substituting one form of inequality for another, ultimately denying our most vulnerable students the full liberal arts curriculum our most privileged youth receive as a matter of course" (Zastrow, 2004). □

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WEB RESOURCES

The November 2007 issue of *Middle Matters* addresses the many benefits of including comprehensive arts programs in middle schools. Articles cover visual arts, music education, band programs, and incorporating art education into a schoolwide curriculum.

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