

RUNNING HEAD: Arts Integration

Arts Integration:

How Do the Arts Impact Social, Cognitive, and Academic Skills?

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To gain a better understanding of the role of the arts in social, cognitive, and academic learning for students with disabilities, we conducted 34 focus groups and interviews with teachers and resident artists in 16 states over two years. Participants enthusiastically described how music, visual arts, and drama have impacted individual children and youth. According to participants, through art activities students gained and demonstrated skills in problem solving, sequencing, following directions, teaming, communicating, planning and organizing, and self-assessment. Across a wide array of circumstances, teachers and artists alike portrayed the arts as giving students choices and opportunities to display both their talents and their knowledge.

pass standardized tests, many teachers are foregoing more extensive projects and moving through textbooks at a more rapid pace.

Contrary to current trends to minimize arts instruction, recent data suggest that the arts can be particularly instrumental in increasing literacy. For example, studies conducted by the Annenberg Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement in Minnesota found that “for students in grades three, four, and five, arts integration is significantly related to gain scores in reading” and that “arts integration is more effective for third grade ELL students and third grade students from low socioeconomic homes [than for students in general]” (Ingram & Reidel, 2003, p.26). Furthermore, for students in third grade, their teachers’ involvement in interdisciplinary teaming with an artist made a significant contribution to student gains in reading. They found that “the more their math teacher integrates arts into mathematics lessons, the more students gain on the mathematics test” (p.29).

Additional support for the positive impact of the arts on academic and cognitive learning comes from a comprehensive meta-analysis of 188 studies conducted between 1950 and 1999 (Winner & Hetland, 2000). They found evidence of reliable causal links in three areas: listening to music and spatial-temporal reasoning; learning to play music and spatial reasoning; and classroom drama and verbal skills.

In *Critical Links*, a research compendium of 64 studies published by the Arts Education Partnership, Deasy (2002) asserts that the influence of the arts may be greater on the academic learning for students with disabilities and special learning needs, students living in poverty, and students learning English as a second language, than for the general population of students. Specifically, several small studies highlight the positive relationship between the arts and students from special populations. (See Table 1.) Note that while these findings are positive,

Key Questions

VSA arts is an international nonprofit organization founded in 1974 by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith. *VSA arts* is creating a society where people with disabilities can learn through, participate in, and enjoy the arts. Currently five million people participate in *VSA arts* programs every year through a nationwide network of affiliates and in over 60 countries. Designated by the United States Congress as the coordinating organization for arts programming for persons with disabilities, *VSA arts* is an international organization dedicated to creating arts opportunities for students with disabilities. *VSA arts* is supported by its affiliate network in offering diverse programs and events and innovative lifelong learning opportunities at the international, national, and local levels ranging from training institutes and artist-in-residence projects to arts camps and emerging artist award programs.

Given the paucity of information about the impact of the art on the social, cognitive, and academic learning of students with disabilities, the current project began with a series of focus groups to gain information from teachers, artists, and *VSA arts* affiliate directors. *VSA arts* conducted this project to better understand the impact of its 50 state

affiliates who operate a

variety of programs to advance the artistic skills of students and adults with disabilities.

The key questions addressed in Year 1 focused on:

- The levels of integration of the arts in academic subject matter.
- How teachers approached integrated (art-academic subject matter) instruction.
- The impact on students with disabilities in terms of academic achievement, cognition, communication, and student attitudes, social skills, and adjustment or coping.

emerged; (b) shifting focus group and interview questions slightly over time as patterns emerged; and (c) combining data across the sites. We compared results to recent studies to interpret the underlying implications of particular data and make recommendations for the next round focus groups. We also used the results from Year 1 to inform the research in Year 2 when we decided to narrow the focus of our questions. To verify the categories that had been developed in our visual analysis and provide quantitative numbers to assist in valuing the weight of specific information, we used *QDA Miner*, an electronic coding system.

The Impact of the Arts

The stories of the focus group participants and interviewees provided considerable

One teacher explained how students use the new vocabulary that they've developed through art activities: "I have several who are quite amazing when they write because they use the vocabulary that we've been working on. And when we read books – I read every day to them – they always are quick to point out, 'trudge, we've heard that word five times today. That was one of our words three weeks ago.' They always pick out the words that are vocabulary words."

anecdotal evidence regarding the value of both including students with disabilities in music, visual art, and theatre activities and of integrating the arts into academic subject matter instruction. For students ages 3-21, teachers provided numerous examples of how the arts were used to introduce topics, study specific subjects, and

demonstrate knowledge and skills. Collectively, teachers provided examples of success for students with a wide array of abilities and disabilities, and across academic subjects.

In general, the comments from teachers reflected arts integration that was done under a "shrunk time-frame" and less than ideal conditions. When asked in a screening survey in Year

targeting. There's an understanding of how you function within a group in a kinetic situation, the understanding how you use space when you're just one person in a big empty space, or when there are many people who are negotiating about how to use the space together.

- One early childhood educator stated, "If you ask kindergarteners to tell you about their pictures, they can go on and on. They love to and they want to tell everybody. We do the little critique when they share their work and talk about it."
- The arts also help students find *appropriate* ways to communicate, even the things that are harder to talk about. "Art is a vehicle for us to express all of our darkest stuff, too."
- For children with autism who lack impulsivity control, music seems to break through some communication barrier. One preschool teacher finds that children are able to follow simple directions to music such as stop, slide and stop, gallop and stop, and walk and stop. Theater seems to be the greatest use of that particular art form for students with self-esteem and social issues. Theater is highly collaborative and very much about relationships and how people interact.

Problem Solving

When asked about how art facilitates problem solving, teachers discussed the relationship to sequencing and figuring out how to organize and improvise with the materials at hand. For example: sequencing is necessary to create art. Students need to think through what to do first, second, third, etc. Other examples:

- One teacher indicated, "in drama there is always problem solving, figuring out how to approach the action and the character, how to create the set, establish the mood, and learn the lines."

Integrating Arts into Academic Projects

A butterfly garden provided an opportunity to study the anatomy, habitat, and life cycles of butterflies as well as to plan for create a place of beauty. (See textbox on previous page).

Planning and Flexibility

To integrate the arts, teachers planned in a variety of ways:

- “It could be via e-mail, phone, coming in and sitting down talking about it, discussing what some of their ideas are, what they want to try. We really look at meeting the first night as the opportunity to make changes in our plans, so our descriptions of the programs are very general... we have certain things that we want to accomplish, but until you meet that group of ten, twelve, fourteen people, you really can't predetermine everything that's going to happen, so I try and help them think of what other projects they want to do, what are the supplies needed, what the approach is...”

In describing their planning, teachers provided several examples supporting the value of providing explicit, concrete directions to students and also making modifications or adding accommodations for students with disabilities with particular needs.

- “So a lot of that is us presenting things in a subtle kind of way. It's not ‘Here's your vocabulary lesson. Get to work.’ It's more of a ‘Here's your project. If you want to talk about the project, it's important that you learn and use the language of the project.’ So then they learn landscape architecture words or visual arts words or what's rebar.”
- “So I think what everybody does, is they set up their model of intervention. They all recognize that there are certain problems that are going on or that reading and writing need

- “I think just looking for growth in any way, in my own self and in the participants, whether it's a new skill learned, or gaining some confidence from trying something new, or a greater ease in social interaction—any number of these things we would say would be success. To see it—I agree with you—sometimes it is not a tangible thing; it is a connection that you see in the response to the pride and work done, an overwhelming smile or a warm handshake, it might be a physical thing, or it might be the product that's created; it's hard to measure, but you feel it, and you know.”

Observing Students

- “There really is an intervention that's going on, and it may not show up in a report card grade, but as we said before, the kids really have multiple and profound disabilities. Maybe the kids just don't go backwards anymore—maybe they're on a path that's not going forward, but that's dragging them back further and further—and now, at least you've intervened so that they are listening to music and using that to dance, so that their muscles aren't becoming more stagnant... Our problem is that they don't show up often on standardized tests.”

Self-Assessment

- “We also did the abstract self-portrait, the doodle, and then we analyzed it afterwards, [asking] what colors did you choose, what shapes did you choose, how detailed was it. It's almost like they're doing a self-evaluation, like ‘wow, I used blacks and grays, I guess I was depressed that day.’”

Choices

The arts engage students with disabilities in the acts of observation, rehearsing, weighing, and judging, all of which are essential tools for learning in general. As they decide how paint goes on canvas, what to say on stage, or how to format a poem is written, they are honing the

ask, but they'll try by themselves, and they'll do it, which wasn't happening before. I think that's really great."

Encouraging the Arts in Schools

As reflected in a letter dated July of 2004 addressed to school superintendents, the then Secretary of Education Rod Paige wrote,

As I am sure you are aware, the arts are a core academic subject under the No Child Left behind Act (NCLB). I believe the arts have a significant role in education both for their intrinsic value and for the ways in which they can enhance general and academic achievement and improve students' social and emotional development.

The teachers we spoke with valued the arts for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. While they were adamant in their beliefs that the arts need no justification, they also provided numerous examples of how students with disabilities benefited emotionally, psychologically, cognitively and academically from experiences with music, drama, and the visual arts. As educators continue to search for ways to enhance learning and academic achievement for all students, it could be very worthwhile to step back and reflect upon the role of the arts for all students and how best to approach this instruction.

References

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- Deasy, R. (2002). *Critical links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*. Washington, DC: Arts Education Partnership.
- Eisner, E. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Table 2.**Increasing Motivation and Improving Vocabulary and Writing**

Several teachers described how drawing both helps students prepare for writing while simultaneously increasing their motivation. When art is used, teachers also noted that students pay greater attention to detail in writing and are more likely to develop and use adjectives for description.

Book making projects, drawing, creating images can help a student work through a beginning, a middle and an end with an idea. It gives them something tangible in a character. It gives them an impetus to learn to write. It lets them pull things together, gives them something to start with.

Vocabulary instruction is supported in many ways through the arts. For example, the use of charades was found to be a successful way to enhance vocabulary acquisition and retrieval in one Florida school. The teacher said, "The students act out the word. It's amazing how their vocabulary has increased."

If students draw pictures, and they draw the story, they will include details in their pictures. *After this experience, the students write using much more detail.* If students are taught to use imaging, seeing the picture in their mind's eye like they've seen it in a painting, then because their writing becomes more connected, it is improved.