The Exclusion of the Creative Arts from Contracted School Curricula for Teaching the Common Core Standards

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Abstract. *Many people would agree the creative arts are essential for children's education and development. For years, the creative arts were integrated into classroom learning units, especially in the language arts, by using drama, music, and drawing; this was considered good teaching. In this study we examined whether contracted curricula designed for teaching the Common Core State Standards integrated the creative arts into English language arts units for grades 3, 6, and 9. Using content analysis, we discovered that the creative arts are largely absent from these curricula. We argue that school districts with limited financial resources will likely adopt the contracted curricula, and children will be further disadvantaged because they will not have opportunities to learn with the creative arts when participating in lessons designed to teach the Common Core.*

Key Words: Arts integration, Common Core Standards, Content Analysis

One of the authors recently visited a South Bronx public high school to observe a social studies lesson. Below is an excerpt from his observation notes:

> Tenth grade students quietly entered their classroom. As they walked in, the teacher handed them two worksheets to be completed during the 60-minute period. One of the worksheets contained a thematic essay question, and the other required students to answer end-of-chapter questions, which were from a 2002 textbook, *Global History and Government.* The thematic essay required students to select two countries and describe how their geographic features influenced their histories. The question worksheet required students to answer text-based questions on the same chapter and topic.
>
> Throughout the class period students worked quietly, with a few whispering to each other as they exchanged ideas about the worksheets. The teacher quietly moved from student to student as he monitored and coached them in worksheet completion. When the period was about to end, the teacher asked the students to line up at the door and turn in their work.

> Afterwards the teacher explained to the observer that the students received points toward their marking period grades for completing the worksheets. He said that all of the students in the course read below grade level, and he selected these worksheets to prepare them for the state Regents exams that would be taken next month. (Author's Observational Journal, December 12, 2015).

It is hard to argue that practice does not contribute to student learning. Yet, practice lessons, as described above, cannot be considered effective teaching, unless it was believed that worksheets actually taught the curriculum. Now, imagine the same lesson when the content was taught toward the goal of fostering student engagement, deep understanding, and critical thinking (Harvey & Daniels, 2015). We anticipate that the envisioned lesson would be far different than the one that was actually observed.

Since publication of the Common Core State Standards (CSSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010), states that have adopted these standards have scrambled to incorporate the standards into their curricula. Although in previous years the New York State Education Department had typically collaborated with school districts throughout the state when developing new curricula, when the Common Core State Standards were implemented, it contracted with outside groups to develop model curricula for teaching them. In its call for proposals, New York issued guidelines, known as the "Publishers Criteria," for developing these curricula for teaching the Common Core. One of the guidelines from the "Publishers Criteria" that is most relevant to this study is the following:

> *Materials make the text the focus of instruction by avoiding features that distract from the text.* Teachers' guides or students' editions of curriculum materials should highlight the reading selections. Everything included in the surrounding materials should be thoughtfully considered and justified before being included. The text should be central, and surrounding materials should be included only when necessary, so as not to distract from the text itself. Instructional support materials should focus on questions that engage students in becoming interested in the text. Rather than being consigned to the margins when completing assignments, close and careful reading should be at the center of classroom activities. Given the focus of the Common Core State Standards, publishers should be extremely sparing in offering activities that are not text-based. Existing curricula will need to be revised substantially to focus classroom time on students and teachers practicing reading, writing, speaking, and listening in direct response to high-quality text. (Coleman & Pimental, 2012, p.8)

In this study we examined the extent to which the contracted curricula for teaching the Common Core in New York State integrated the visual and performing arts into English language arts units and lessons. Our interest in the visual and performing arts stemmed from our own interests and experiences as teachers and teacher educators in which we observed that student engagement typically improved when the creative arts were integrated into classroom learning activities.

Review of Related Literature

Public schools have historically exerted a prominent role in children's learning of the visual and performing arts. It was in K-12 classrooms that children were actively engaged in music, visual arts, and drama, and this learning was especially important for children from impoverished neighborhoods who were unlikely to have otherwise received such first-hand experiences and learning opportunities (Darby & Catteral, 1994; Fiske, 1999).

Well-known and respected learning theorists, such as Eisner (1992), Gardner (1993), Gallas (1994), Greene (1993), and Goodlad (1984), view the arts as fundamental to children's education. The importance of including the arts in classroom teaching quite likely goes back to Dewey's (1934) ideas about progressive education in which he considered the arts as essential for children's education and development. More recently, Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences illustrated the importance of including the arts in classroom teaching by encouraging diverse ways of processing, understanding, and interpreting the world. Gardner's multiple intelligence theory fits particularly well in today's inclusive classrooms where children with disabilities are presented with diverse ways of acquiring and representing knowledge (Meyers, Rose & Gordon, 2014). Moreover, contemporary learning theorists argue that the arts are an important part of the human experience and worthy of being the subjects of study in their own right (e.g., Catteral, 1998; Eisner, 1992; Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013).

The research base for learning with the creative arts is largely descriptive in nature and lacking in studies that can empirically point to causal relationships between arts integration and academic achievement (Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013). Yet, there is a long and consistent stream of descriptive research indicating that the creative arts improve children's classroom engagement and their creative and critical thinking. For example, researchers have found that the creative arts positively influence children's learning and success in school because they stimulate their imaginations (Csikszentmihalyi & Schiefele, 1992; Hartse, 2014). Others explain that the arts foster children's ability to think critically (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles, 1999) and offer them ways of expressing their ideas and feelings that are not easily presented with alphabetic texts (Kagan, 2009). Additionally, theorists have explained that the arts provide children with opportunities for using culturally based sign systems for examining and representing their worlds to others (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles, 1999; Harste, 2014).

There is some evidence suggesting that the arts improve children's academic achievement in specific disciplines as well. Specifically, researchers have argued that the creative arts improve language development (Chappell & Faltis, 2013; Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013), reading comprehension (Shanahan et al., 2010), students' classroom engagement (Csikszentmihalyi & Schiefele, 1992) and their overall academic achievement (Catteral & Waldoff ,1999; Greene, 1994; Heath & Wolf, 2005; Lee, Patel, Cawthon & Steingut, 2014; Walker, Tabone & Weltske, 2011).

Methods for teaching reading and the language arts have long incorporated the creative arts as ways to engage children in learning and improve their literacy achievement. Curriculum models for incorporating the arts have been used in many schools in the United States and throughout the world (Duma & Silverstein, 2014; Gullat, 2008; Robinson, 2013).

Methods textbooks (e.g., Donovan & Pascale, 2013; Goldberg, 2012) and professional journal articles have regularly recommended arts integration in classroom teaching. For example, McLaughlin and Vogt (2000) describe ways the visual and performing arts can be used throughout the disciplines. Wilhelm (2007) describes ideas for using drama for helping students

analyze and interpret literature. Manzano and Simms (2013) present strategies for using visualization for learning new vocabulary words. Margulies and Naal (2002) provide mind-mapping strategies that incorporate color, symbols, and graphics to illustrate the content of what students know and learn. Johnson and Lewis (1987) describe many visual art activities for helping elementary children visualize the literature they read, while Burke and Harste (1988) describe teaching practices for integrating the creative arts in literacy lessons. Recently, Lindblom, Galante, Grabow and Wilson (2016) describe how infographics, which integrates text with images and color, can help students comprehend informational literature.

Yet, despite the rich theoretical underpinnings indicating that the arts enrich students' learning, they are increasingly neglected in today's schools (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011), and some evidence suggests this to be especially true in low-income districts (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011; Woodworth, Gallagher, & Guha, 2007). While some of the neglect is the consequence of reduced school funding (American School Board, 2003; Balsley, 2011), the standards movement has placed greater emphasis on children's performance in high stakes testing at the expense of learning in non-tested areas (Au, 2011). Since the enactment of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation (NCLB; U.S. Congress 2001), for instance, schools have increasingly been under pressure to produce strong test results in reading and mathematics to document children's learning. As more instructional time has been devoted to improving their performance in these subject areas, less time is allocated for the visual and performing arts. Berliner (2011), for example, reports that in some schools the classroom time that was once allocated for the arts has been cut entirely or replaced with test preparation for statewide examinations. The Center for Educational Studies (2008) explains that the typical school in its study reduced art and music instruction by an average of 35%.

The "Race to the Top" legislation, *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA)*, Section 14005-6, Title XIV, (Public Law 111-5), has further contributed to the reduction of the creative arts from children's school day. "Race to the Top" legislative funding involves assessing school and teacher effectiveness of children's performance in high-stakes testing. As a result, curriculum leaders and teachers typically make the choice to devote more classroom time to the subjects being tested than to curricula areas not directly assessed (Berliner, 2011; Moon, Brighton, Jarvis, & Hall, 2007; Musoleno & White, 2010). Such curricula narrowing has become an everyday consequence of the use of high stakes testing to assess schools' and teachers' performance (Au, 2011; Polesel, Rice, & Duffer, 2014).

Given the previous findings that high-stakes testing has reduced the teaching of the creative arts from children's school experiences, we decided to examine the extent to which the arts appear in contracted curricula for teaching the Common Core State Standards. Our specific research questions pertained to contracted curricula in the English language arts and were the following:

- Are the visual and performing arts integrated into New York's contracted English language arts curricula?
- What teaching strategies, if any, are used for integrating the visual and performing arts into English language arts units and lessons in the contracted curricula?

Method

Content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013; Weber, 1990) served as our research method. We

used content analysis because of its appropriateness for answering our research questions, and because it has been shown to offer a systematic and replicable method for examining texts (Stemler, 2001). The contracted language arts curricula that are freely available on New York's State Education Department's EngageNY website (https://www.engageny.org) served as our data source. Two researchers collaborated in analyzing the contracted curricula in this study.

Data Collection

In 2012 New York's Board of Regents awarded Expeditionary Learning the contract to develop curriculum modules for the elementary grades (3-8) and to Odell Education for the secondary grades (9-12). These modules are available as open-source curricula to districts to "adopt or adapt" for teaching the Common Core Learning Standards in their schools (https://www.engageny.org/common-core-curriculum).

We identified language arts curricula modules for grades 3, 6, and 9 for multiple reasons. The first reason we selected the language arts as the focus of this study is that reading and the language arts have long been one of our interests as researchers and teacher educators. Second, we selected the language arts as our study focus, because the Common Core State Standards introduced "shifts" in classroom reading instruction that further interested us; these shifts pertained to using reading to acquire knowledge rather than from teacher presentation or classroom learning activities, increasing the use of informational texts in elementary reading, increasing the complexity of classroom reading materials, using evidence-based reading and writing activities, and acquiring richer academic vocabulary. We decided to examine the English Language Arts curricula for the elementary and middle school grades and identified Grade 3 ELA Module 1 Units 1-3 (38 lessons), Grade 6 ELA Module 1 Units 1-3 (40 Lessons), and Grade 9 ELA Module I, Unit 1-3 (48 lessons) as the focus of this study. We believed a close examination of the 126 lessons at these grade levels would be representative of patterns and themes found in contracted curricula across all the grades.

Data Analysis and Representation

We first decided to independently scrutinize the contracted language arts curriculum units and lessons in grades 3, 6, and 9. We each conducted a preliminary review of those lessons by examining them for instances when the visual or performing arts appeared and used this review to generate descriptive terms for our more detailed analyses. Stemler (2001) explains that one of the most important requirements for obtaining reliability in content analysis is to agree about the search terms and synonyms. Consequently, prior to coding the designated lessons, we agreed on the search terms that would count as instances in which the visual or performing arts were evidenced in the lessons. We agreed that the occurrence of the following words or phrases would serve as indicators that one or more of the visual or performing arts were being used: "draw," "sketch," "dramatize," "theater," "readers' theater," "chorally read," "partner read," "perform," "role play," "music," "sing" or "song," "dance" and "movement."

After completing our individual analyses we crosschecked our results to confirm our findings to establish inter-rater reliability. After analysis and discussion we concurred 100% of the time on the coding of these lessons. We further decided to represent the identified instances of the visual and performing arts in table form, containing descriptive annotations about how the visual and performing arts were incorporated in the respective lessons (N=126).

Results

Findings of our content analysis revealed that the visual and performing arts are rarely integrated in New York's contracted ELA curricula for grades 3, 6, and 9. We identified only seven instances of the use of the visual and performing arts in the entire body of 126 lessons; the use of the visual and performing arts in these lessons represented only 95 minutes of lesson time out of approximately 126 hours.[1]

The seven instances where visual and performing arts activities occurred were in grades 3 and 6. The Grade 3 curriculum modules contained only three lessons in which the arts were included, although these were for oral reading fluency practice wherein children read chorally or with partners. Grade 6 lessons contained four instances of the visual arts: In Unit 2, Lesson 2, students draw a picture of a vocabulary concept; in Unit 2, Lesson 5, they "design" a non-linguistic symbol of a vocabulary item; In Unit 3, Lesson 1, they complete a "Differentiated Exit Ticket" in which they draw a story character's face onto a bio card; and finally in Unit 3, Lesson 2, students participate in a movement activity while listening to music. We discovered no instances of the visual and performing arts in any of the Grade 9 lessons. Table 1 displays the results of our analyses of instances in which the visual and performing arts appeared in the contracted curricula for teaching the Common Core in New York State.

Table 1: Results of our Analyses of the Contracted Curricula for Teaching the Common Core State Standards

Grade	Module	Unit	Lesson	Descriptive Annotation	Allocated time
3	1	1	1-11	There are no instances of the visual and performing arts in these lessons	0
3	1	2	1-7; 10	There are no instances of the visual and performing arts in these lessons	0
3	1	2	8	Students chorally read text to develop fluency; although not a dramatic reading, it is done for phrasing, rate, and expression.	10 mins
3	1	2	9	Students partner read to develop their oral reading fluency.	15 mins
3	1	2	10	Students orally read for fluency,, in which they partner practice for fluency. The time designation is for partner practice, not individual	25
3	1	3	1-17	There are no instances of the visual and performing arts in these lessons – not done	0
6	1	1	2	Vocabulary cards are used in which students "draw a picture of	15 mins

1 Expeditionary Learning identified lesson activities according to allocated minutes, but Odell Education identified lesson activities by percentage of lesson time rather than minutes.

				what you visualize." This is similar to the Frayer. Occurs during "worktime."	
6	1	1	1, 2-13	There are no instances of the visual and performing arts in these lessons	0
6	1	2	5	"Word Model" that students complete in triads and involves the "design" of a non-linguistic symbol representing a vocabulary item, which is similar to the Frayer method of teaching vocabulary. Occurs in the "worktime segment of the lesson."	20 mins
6	1	2	1-4; 6-20	There are no instances of the visual and performing arts in these lessons	0
6	1	3	1	"Differentiated Exit Ticket" involves completing biographic info card that includes a drawing of the character's face. Occurs in "Closing and Assessment."	5 mins
6	1	3	2	"Mix and Mingle" involves movement and music in which students move around classroom and tell their "hero's journey" to a partner. Occurs in "Closing and Assessment."	5 mins
6	1	3	3-7	There are no instances of the visual and performing arts in these lessons	0
9	1	1	1-17	There are no instances of the visual and performing arts in these lessons	0
9	1	2	1-11	There are no instances of the visual and performing arts in these lessons	0
9	1	3	1-20	There are no instances of the visual and performing arts in these lessons	0

Discussion

In the final decades of the 20th century, teachers often viewed the visual and performing arts as essential for helping students construct and represent knowledge about the world. Teachers integrated their units and lessons with the creative arts and did so to engage children in classroom learning and deepen their understanding of the concepts and processes being taught. Although much of the research supporting use of the creative arts in classroom teaching has been

descriptive (Winner, Goldstein, & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013), the number and frequency of the studies (e.g., Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Lee, Patel, Cawthon & Steingut, 2014; Walker, Tabone & Weltske, 2011) have supported educators' long-held beliefs that the creative arts foster student engagement, language development, and academic achievement. Our own experiences and observations as teacher educators have further informed our belief that when the arts are integrated into classroom lessons, children's engagement and learning improves.

However, our analyses of New York's contracted curricula for teaching the Common Core Standards reveal that the visual and performing arts are almost entirely omitted from its units and lessons. Although this is only one state, its policies and practices likely reflect those experienced in other states and regions as well. That is, the arts are being further marginalized from children's school experiences when contracted EngageNY Common Core curricula are used.

The lessons analyzed in this study were sometimes socially interactive and included such well-established learning activities as Think-Pair-Share, Gallery Tour, Fishbowl, Inside-Outside circle, but the visual and performing arts were absent. The curriculum developers evidently avoided veering too far from text-based learning activities when planning their units and lessons. We believe that the "Publishers Criteria," which explicitly required "text-based" lessons for close reading and evidence-based writing, strongly influenced the results found in our study. That is, learning activities were largely accomplished through text-based discussions, close reading, and evidence-based writing activities without integration of the creative arts.

The restrictive effects of high stakes testing are well documented (e.g., Shepard, 1990; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012), and discussed in this paper. Our study provides evidence that contracted curricula have similar effects. That is, the contracted units and lessons for teaching the Common Core are almost entirely text-based with little arts integration. We further suspect that, because these lessons are open-source, school districts lacking financial resources will likely adopt the contracted curricula as written rather than allocate money to write their own curricula or revise these modules to meet local needs. Children attending schools in low-income districts already suffer from fewer arts-based learning activities than those in better-financed schools (Rabkin & Hedberg, 2011; Woodworth, Gallagher, & Guha, 2007), and our findings indicate that use of this contracted curricula from EngageNY will further aggravate these disparities.

The importance of engaging and motivating students to learn is critically important in today's world. Although close textual reading and writing with evidence, which are emphasized in the Common Core Standards, are essential (Fisher & Frey, 2015) and not necessarily un-engaging or un-motivating (Maloch & Horsey, 2013), the contracted curricula analyzed here will further limit student access to the creative arts for learning.

We are especially concerned that these curricula units will restrict students' learning to that of close reading and evidenced-based writing when so much has been learned about the benefits of arts integration. Because of the contracted curricula's emphasis on text-based reasoning, the Common Core might inadvertently be producing students who are well trained, but not well educated.

We close by asking readers to imagine revisiting the lesson described in the opening of this manuscript when infused with the creative arts. Instead of distributing worksheets for composing informative essays about how countries are affected by geography, students might

compose essays in which they write for real audiences and purposes about how those respective countries might protect their geographic sites. They might accompany their essays with digital or hand drawings of the geographic features of the respective countries. To replace worksheets containing text-based questions, students might compose mind-maps with images, symbols, and alphabetic text to illustrate key textual propositions contained in their textbook chapters; Popplet (http://popplet.com/) or Glogster (http://www.glogster.com) come to mind as creative online tools for incorporating multimedia, text, image and audio, clearly making the learners' active construction of knowledge paramount. Most important, classroom discussion in which teachers elicit deep and critical thinking about the interactions between a country's historical events and its geography, such as with debate, dramatic tableaus, and simulated newscasts, would more likely generate greater engagement and richer learning than worksheets could ever do!

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