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## Arts Integration: A Study of Teachers' Perceptions

"It's almost a way of sneaking vegetables into their food."

The role of the arts in the schools in the United States dates back as far as Horace Mann in the late 1800's who insisted upon the inclusion of arts in the curriculum in his belief that learning would be enhanced. Dewey proposed that there is a positive relationship between instruction in the arts and cognition (Gullatt, 2008).

Arts integration is the use of art and content to enable students to make better connections, "Arts integration is the combining of two equal groups into a unified whole," (Berke, 2000). This unified whole is developed by using both sides of the brain: the creative and the technical. Drake (2007) took the concept of arts integration a step farther to incorporate connections to the real world. A paradigm shift occurs as the arts are interwoven throughout the curriculum rather than being taught as discrete subjects.

As stated by Phillips, Gorton, Pinciotti, and Sachdev (2010), "Arts-related activities engage representational, communicative, expressive and social capabilities that can stimulate new shifts in young children's awareness, perception and thought."

If we are to compete in a global economy, our children deserve every learning advantage, which includes a sustainable arts education program. The bestselling author of *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman, states: "More than ever, our secret sauce comes from our ability to integrate art, music, and literature with the hard sciences."

The President's Committee on the Arts (PCAH, 2011), supports the arts as a vital part of the culture and life of this country. PCAH believes students deserve access to the arts in school as part of a complete education.

The arts and humanities define who we are as a people. That is their power -- to remind us of what we each have to offer, and what we all have in common. To help us understand our history and imagine our future. To give us hope in the moments of struggle and to bring us together when nothing else will (*First Lady Michelle Obama, President's Committee on the Arts, 2011*).

Once educators understand the value of arts integration, the difficult part begins. Implementing an integrated arts curriculum in the schools appears to be easy; therefore a study was designed to get the teacher's point of view. Teachers who have undergone this process to determine perceptions regarding the impact on professional development, student performance, student engagement, and school climate were interviewed

The purpose of the study is to examine the perceptions of teachers who were teaching in an integrated arts environment. It was essential to the study that the selected educators be employed in a school that included a fully integrated arts program. Mooreland Heights Elementary School was selected as the target school, as this was their sixth year of implementation of the integrated arts program. The school serves approximately 260 students in grades K-5 and is a Title I school. A purposive sample was employed for this research study. Subjects were selected by the administrator of Mooreland Heights Elementary School based on participation in professional development offered at the state level and the number of years of experience at the selected school. Each grade level and special area was represented, with a total of 13 participants. A designated area within the school was provided for the interviews. Each

interview lasted approximately one hour using an interview guide. The interview protocol included the following questions with probes to open further discussion when warranted.

- Describe your initial response to learning that your school was going to be arts integration designated.
- What is/was your background in arts education prior to this initiative?
- What type of training or professional development have you had to assist you in the implementation of this initiative?
- What would you say about the quality of the professional development?
- What additional training do you think you need?
- What changes have you made in your teaching due to this initiative?
- How would you describe the level of administrative support and resources?
- What changes have you observed in the school's climate?
- What is the impact that this initiative had upon the students?
- What is the impact that this initiative had upon parents and community?

A letter of permission was obtained from the school system, and each participant reviewed and signed a consent form before the interview began. The researchers recorded and noted responses of the participants as well. Collected data were coded and reviewed for emerging themes based upon participants' perceptions related to arts integration. The data were reported without identifiers.

The three themes that emerged through an analysis of the data were continuous staff development, connection between arts and content, and support. Upon further examination, three areas of support were identified: administrative, parents and community, and corporate.

### **Continuous staff development**

Quality professional development in the arts provides teachers with information about various forms of art. Most importantly, they realize that you do not have to be an artist to enjoy art. This experience enables them to better understand the anxiety of some of their students. The success of an arts integrated program directly correlates with professional development that includes coaching from teaching artists and professional development led by other teachers (Burnaford, 2009; Wilcox et al, 2010; and Oreck, 2004). In service opportunities that include art specialists and teaching artists help to motivate and inspire the classroom teacher, because the teacher is more confident as a result of learned instructional strategies (Norobi, 2012).

The professional development opportunities provided the teachers participating in the study included a high level of involvement as evidenced by one teacher's response:

They've really gone above and beyond to make sure that we really understand and even letting us learn different art forms ourselves. Teachers also identified a wide variety of activities afforded them. One teacher commented, We had Claudia Cornett here that gave us all kinds of in services. We've visited other schools. We went to Hilton Head where they integrated the arts in the elementary school. We went to Ashley Rivers in South Carolina.

In addition, time is allotted for teachers to observe demonstration lessons provided by faculty from all of the Art 360 schools.

The teachers were provided with staff development within the classroom in the form of demonstrations and coaching as evidenced by the comments of one teacher:

It varies because if we have an artist in residence come then they do a professional development. Sharon also comes Monday thru Thursday to the classrooms and will actually do a professional development. Put on what she is doing with our kids. Or if it's the person doing the poetry . . .we did an hour long in service with him. It's those opportunities that Miss Self makes sure that we get . . . because not all teachers can leave their classrooms to go.

### **Connection between arts and content**

“Neuro-Ed initiative researchers at John Hopkins hypothesize that arts integration, which emphasizes repetition of information in multiple ways, provides the advantage of embedding knowledge in long-term memory” (Snowden, 2011). Boulder Community School of Integrated Studies echoes this research as the reason why they focus on arts-integrated learning, that is, because it aids in cognitive development (Boulder Community School of Integrated Studies, 2012). Oklahoma A+ Schools incorporate a variety of strategies to enrich their curriculum through the arts: curriculum mapping; interdisciplinary thematic units; differentiation of content and assessment; multiple intelligences; reflective self-assessment; collaboration (Robelen, 2012). As one participant stated, “A true arts integrated lesson requires that you really match the standards and teach them cohesively.” In a report, Oklahoma City found that, on average, Oklahoma A+ Schools consistently “significantly outperformed” comparable district students in reading and math (Robelen, 2012). The reason that the achievement may be significantly higher is summed up in another participant’s comments about students and learning:

They don’t really quite know that the entire lesson is going to be based on math. . . But by hitting all of the things at the same time, they get it not only in their classroom but they get it in art. They get it in music and they’re able to have this like view of the subject matter.

### **Administrative Support**

“Principal participation emerged as integral and critical to success of each Value Plus School. For the Value Plus Schools who demonstrated significant progress, that success can be directly linked to principal leadership and influence” (Tennessee Arts Commission, 2011, p 6). According to the Arts Education Partnership (2011, May) there are three ways principals can promote arts education in their schools: a) establish a school-wide commitment to arts learning; b) create an arts-rich learning environment; and c) rethink the use of time and resources. Research shows school principals are the primary decision makers as to whether the arts have a place in their schools. Principals should be the instructional leaders in assisting teachers in creating ways to include art in their lessons. The principal of Mooreland Heights demonstrated these attributes as evidenced by comments from teachers at the school. Dr. Miller supported staff development initiatives by providing release time for teachers and securing resources.

In the words of one teacher: “Dr. Miller has always been supportive of arts training. We have a lot of support from our administration here. He’s been a great advocate for the art program. He is always talking about it in the community and bringing people in and giving a lot of their time.”

Another teacher stated: “Dr. Miller is very supportive of the arts integration initiative. He will provide us with substitutes so we can do some collaborative planning with our arts specialists. . . in the beginning we had some professional days where we could go and observe.”

### **Parent and Community Support**

The school principal can be vital in acquiring support from the parents and community. According to Jeynes (2007), parental involvement has long been recognized as one of the most important factors related to student achievement. Schools need the support of community and family, which requires collaboration from a variety of groups, such as families, community groups, and educators (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997). During the interview process, teachers reported a marked increase in parental involvement during the implementation of the integrated arts program. As students began sharing their experiences, parents wanted to know more about the program and the changes that were occurring. One teacher commented:

I’ve noticed with each program I have more parent support. I have more people here. And they’re excited to see what their kids are doing and what their kids keep talking about. So they want to be here. We had an arts festival Tuesday night. I don’t see how we actually fit all of those people in this school...that’s not always been the case....

### **Corporate Support**

While local support of the arts is the first step in the implementation process, educators recognize the importance of outside support. The teachers interviewed indicated that support from the Tennessee Arts Commission provided materials, staff development, visiting artists, and financial support for *Value+* leaders to work with the classroom teachers to develop instructional strategies.

### **A Statement From the Principal**

Mooreland Heights Elementary School is a K-5 Title One school demographically located in an urban setting in the Knox County School System. The school was built in 1929 with additions built on to the initial structure throughout the years.

In 2005-2006 school year, Mooreland Heights was selected to be part of a four-year grant from the Tennessee Arts Commission as one of six Value Plus Schools (VPS) with a focus on art integration across Tennessee. After the initial four-year VPS grant, Mooreland Heights was chosen as a mentoring school by the Tennessee Arts Commission. The Arts 360 grant is solely based in the Knox County School System. Mooreland Heights is a mentoring school for four other Knox County schools. This grant is currently in the third year of a four-year grant.

Mooreland Heights was selected as a mentoring school due to the successful results as a participant in the VPS grant. Mooreland Heights has shown academic growth in both gains and achievement over the seven-years as an art integrated school. In 2011-2012, Mooreland Heights was chosen by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) as a reward school for academic gains in all sub-group areas. Since 2008,

Mooreland Heights has consistently been in the top 10% for gains through Tennessee's annual data collection for academics- TCAP's.

And finally, achievement data from the 2011-2012 school year show that Mooreland Heights has met all the requirements in all sub-group areas for gains in the Annual Measurement Objective (AMO).

Mooreland Heights is a strong urban school in many areas. However, without any reservations, I believe the art integrated model that is incorporated at all grade-levels in all content areas, has made a significant differences on student academics, teacher morale, parent efficacy, and national recognition.

I'm proud to be part of a hardworking faculty in an unbelievable school.

## **Conclusion**

The range of teachers' perceptions ran the gamut from excitement and a willingness to try something new to fear of failure, additional responsibilities, and time consuming activities within the curriculum. The integrated arts program at the selected school has made a difference in the instructional program through staff development and additional resources. In the words of the teachers, their students are the beneficiaries of these efforts. Lenore Blank Kelner (2010) summed up the dilemma facing educators trying to provide an integrated arts program for students by stating,

As I reflect...I realize that there really is no mystery about why the arts produce many...miracle moments in classrooms. The students are actively participating in the lesson. They are learning through multiple learning modalities, making creative decisions, adding to the direction of the lesson, and helping to sculpt its form and format. And they are learning in the way that children have always learned best—they are enjoying the process.

The only real mystery is why state legislatures, school systems, and administrators, and teachers are not clamoring for more arts integration to be used in the classrooms. The costs are low and the benefits great (p. 231).

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