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VOICES FROM THE FIELD

INVESTIGATING TEACHER PERSPECTIVES
ON THE RELEVANCE OF ARTS
INTEGRATION IN THEIR CLASSROOM

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Voices from the Field: Teachers' Views on the Relevance of Arts Integration

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In light of the global issues that surround our schools and classrooms, policy makers, superintendents, principals, and teachers themselves must consider what teachers need to know and do to prepare their students to be able to meet the demands of the 21st century. Business leaders are calling for more innovation and creativity to prepare students for a future we can't fully envision and to solve complex problems that will require interdisciplinary skills and the ability to use creativity, critical thinking and communication (www.p21.org). Policy makers scramble to address achievement gaps that are wider than ever. Meanwhile, the demographics of America's schools are changing. The U.S. Census predicts that 38% of the population will be comprised of people of color by 2025, and as high as 47% in 2050 (Gay, 2000). With this changing environment, how must the curriculum and educational practices be tailored to best prepare students to succeed in the future? How are teacher education programs poised to address cultural and societal dynamics? To understand how arts integration is relevant in today's educational climate, Lesley University researchers from the Creative Arts in Learning program and an external advisory team with funding by the Ford Foundation, investigated the perspectives and practices of teacher alumni from the Integrated Teaching Through the Arts graduate program.

The Integrated Teaching Through the Arts (ITA), M.Ed. program has engaged K-12 classroom teachers in arts integration for over 35 years in Cambridge, MA, and at 70 satellite locations in 23 states. Nationally, there are over 10,000 alumni of this program. The ITA program is grounded on the idea that the arts are central to learning, and that bringing arts integration theory and practice into teacher education will lead to more innovative teaching practices in K-12 classrooms meeting the needs of diverse learners. The ITA program is a 33-credit program with eleven courses—six studio art courses (poetry, music, visual art, storytelling, drama, and creative movement), and five additional courses in curriculum theory, arts-based technology, connecting education with community, arts integration theory and practice, and thesis writing. Students go through the program as a cohort enabling a professional learning community that fosters support, risk-taking, and dialogue.



Methods

Researchers used a mixed methods approach. An electronic survey was distributed to alumni from across the country to gather a broad base of teachers' perspectives on the relevance and practice of arts integration in the classroom, and to understand how teachers see the impact this practice has on their students. Two hundred and four alumni (204) from 19 states participated in the survey. Following an analysis of the survey responses, 11 focus groups were held to probe several identified themes that emerged from the survey with 67 teachers from alumni-rich sites including Las Vegas, NV; Florence, SC; Tacoma and Kent, WA; and Raymond, NH. These teachers also created visual maps describing the supports and constraints present in their educational contexts. From among the participants of these focus groups, the researchers interviewed and observed the classrooms of nine teachers from Florence, SC; Tacoma, WA; and Raymond, NH.

Findings

The results of this study illustrate that when teachers adopt and implement arts integration strategies into their professional practice, they can motivate and engage learners in their classroom while infusing their own practices with creativity.

The data suggests that arts integrated teaching:

- Leads to deep learning, increased student ownership, and engagement with academic content
- Provides a variety of strategies for accessing content and expressing understanding
- Creates learning that is culturally responsive and relevant in students' lives
- Engages students in creativity, innovation and imagination
- Renews teachers' commitment to teaching

At a time when schools worry about increasing student dropout rates this study finds that students involved in arts-integrated learning become more engaged with the content. Teachers report that students find more relevance in material, are more likely to develop a sense of ownership of their learning, and are more deeply invested in their learning when learning in, through and with the arts.

Key Features of the ITA Program

When asked what aspects of the ITA program had the most significant impact on their practice, 92.5% of teachers surveyed noted that theories of learning styles and multiple intelligences were most valuable, and 74.3% noted that multicultural education had substantially informed their teaching. This theme of teaching to the individual—of knowing who the student is and how that student learns—is the foundation of the ITA approach and was a significant finding among practitioners in the research study.

In addition to these findings, data suggest several key features of the ITA program that contribute to the modification of teachers' pedagogical approaches. These include the:

- Professional learning community formed as a result of the cohort model
- Hands-on experiential learning and engagement in the creative process (mirroring the process teachers' students will engage with in the classroom)
- Use of the arts as languages that open multiple pathways for exploration and understanding

The cohort model connects teachers to each other for collegial support and generates professional dialogue. The data suggest that the experiential approach of arts-based inquiry is transformative for teachers both personally and professionally. As part of every course, teachers embark on artistic explorations. They are placed in the role of the student and as a result they develop a deeper understanding of the creative process and potential for learning as well as the impact arts integration can have on their students. Another central tenet of the ITA program is the idea that learning in, through, and with the arts promotes flexible options to present information, multiple ways for students to access content and choices for students to express understanding. In addition, the arts address multiple learning styles, recognize multiple intelligences and reach across cultural differences.

The Impact of Arts Integration on Student Learning

Data revealed that from the perspective of teachers in the study, arts integration leads to deep learning, is culturally responsive and develops students' 21st century skills.

The immersion in the arts and the creative process stimulates improved interest in and engagement with content resulting in enhanced academic outcomes.

Deep Learning

Teachers reported that students engaged in arts-integrated learning became more engaged with curricular content, their investment in their learning and ownership of material increased. Teachers saw these shifts lead to a mastery of the material and a deepened sense that students found ways to make the content relevant to their lives. Teachers indicated that they found students were more successful after learning through the arts.

21st Century Skill Development

In addition to enhancing the learning of content and skills, teachers also note the role of the arts in fostering critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and the ability to see multiple perspectives. These skills have been noted by business and policy leaders as crucial for success in the highly technological and globally diverse world. Dunleavy and Milton (2008) point to the ways that deep learning helps students develop these capacities they will need in the future. "More than ever, their health and well-being, success in the workplace, ability to construct identities and thrive in a pluralistic society, as well as their sense of agency as active citizens, depend on it." (p. 4.)



Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Another key theme that emerged from the data was the role the arts can play in students' understanding of their own identity, and in turn, in developing sensitivity to and acceptance of the perspectives of others. Arts integration can support the development of empathy and respect for others. This finding was mirrored by a shared philosophy of ITA faculty members that culturally responsive pedagogy is key in addressing current issues of equity, ability, academic achievement, retention and success for all students. Because the arts draw upon the background knowledge of students, teachers' note that through arts-integrated teaching and learning student voices and cultural backgrounds are invited into the curriculum.

Data suggested that arts integration supported themes of cultural identity and consideration of social prejudice and contexts into the curriculum. Because the creation of artistic responses so often draws from "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students" it serves "to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students" (Gay, 2000, p. 29).

Reaching all students is critical to helping all students achieve academic success. Yet there is a major achievement gap in this country between culturally/linguistically diverse students and economically disadvantaged youth when compared to more privileged students. As part of this study teachers were asked to consider how arts integration affects their diverse students.

LEARNING OUTCOMES BY POPULATION

As this chart indicates, arts integration can support the needs of diverse learners in a variety of ways.

Student Population	Arts Integration Learning Outcomes
Gifted & Talented	93.8% report students reflect more deeply and 87% develop creativity
Special Needs	88% report students are more engaged and 88% note students access content in new ways
Economically Disadvantaged	85% note students are more engaged and 84% note that students are more collaborative with their peers
Culturally and/or Linguistically Diverse	81% note increased self-expression and 81% report break-through moments in students' learning have occurred



Impact on Teachers' Practice

There is a crisis brewing in today's schools with escalating rates of retiring teachers coupled with the fact that nearly half of new teachers leave the field within their first five years of teaching (Carrol, T. 2007). This leaves schools to face the problem about how to staff schools with highly qualified teachers who will stay in the field. Given this alarming rate of new teacher attrition, researchers sought to understand what leads to the retention of teachers who choose to stay in the field.

In this study, 67% of teachers who responded to the survey noted that their participation in the ITA program played a role in their decision to stay in the field of teaching. When asked to elaborate, they noted that participation in the program rejuvenated and reconnected them to the passion for teaching and learning that brought them to the teaching field in the first place.

Teachers described the professional growth they experienced as a result of their participation in the ITA program noting that they found a new perspective on teaching and learning. Teachers talked about how repeated, ongoing immersion in the creative process through different art modalities over a two-year period allowed them to explore, develop and integrate the arts into their own practice. As a result, they were able to guide their students through similar processes with greater insight. Teachers report seeing their students in new ways and noted significant changes they were able to make in the classrooms as a result of their use of arts in the curriculum.



Teachers' Contexts

Through visual drawings or maps of their educational contexts created as part of the focus group discussions, teachers shared the diverse range of contexts they work within. The review and discussion of these context maps gave a clear picture of supports and constraints that affect the use of arts integrated strategies for teachers in the study. Data show that teachers feel increasing pressure and demand from administration to increase student achievement as measured on standardized tests. They note that often, the physical environment in schools hampers learning. Class size continues to grow while teacher workload continues to mount. Teachers noted feelings of isolation and disconnection. Teachers, who were able to integrate the arts in their teaching, felt that support of their administration was paramount to their success. Despite the enormous challenges teachers face, many teachers in the study found they were able to find ways to integrate the arts despite obstacles—because they see the difference arts integration makes in their classrooms. Resiliency and the ability to navigate existing structures was a theme for teachers who had made arts integration a core strategy of their pedagogy. Characteristics of resiliency included the ability to use research to advocate for arts integration, to develop and work with allies in their schools, and the ability to document and bring forward the achievements of students through arts integration.

This study illustrates the important implications arts integration has for the preparation of teachers. Training teachers to incorporate the creative process in their teaching can prepare teachers to model necessary elements of creativity, innovation and imagination that their students need to thrive now and in their future lives, while fostering deep learning in the arts and across content areas.

Is arts integration relevant in today's educational climate? With the ability to reach diverse learners, increase students' engagement and commitment to learning, arts integration holds significant benefits for teachers' students. In addition, the restorative effects on teachers cannot be overlooked. When teachers are creative in their own practice, they deepen their commitment to their teaching, creating a dynamic cycle of teaching and learning that benefits both teachers and their students.

References

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