

Arts Integration: A Playful Approach to Education

Richard Deasy referred to arts integration as "the effort to build a set of relationships between learning in the arts and learning in the other skills and subjects of the curriculum." It is the place where an arts discipline and an academic discipline intersect in a cohesive and natural way.

From 2005 to 2014 Educational Arts Team partnered with the Jersey City Public Schools on three projects funded by United States Department of Education to study the effectiveness of arts integration on the social and academic skills of children 7 to 13 years of age (grades two through seven). Approximately 1000 children were studied each of the 10 years by independent evaluators.

Lessons were based upon the school district's literature series and writing curriculum and explored language arts standards related to character, setting, theme and plot. The lessons employed active theater arts strategies and corresponding standards namely acting, scenery, and directing. These were natural places where lessons could find a common ground.

In the project for children ages 7 to 9 one of our lessons included a role drama featuring a queen (teacher) and her staff (students) who worked on solving the problem of getting back the queen's baby from a nameless imp. The role drama was connected to a Rumpelstiltskin text through reading, analyzing characters and writing prediction pieces.

Lessons for students ages 11 to 14 focused on exploring dilemmas characters faced in novels they were reading in class. For example, in the *Midwife's Apprentice*, Alice, the heroine of this coming-of-age medieval tale about a homeless girl, has escaped from the clutches of three drunken abusive teenage villagers to the top of a tree set in front of a deep stream. One of the three boys falls into the stream and begins to drown. The other two run away in fright, none of the three can swim.

A series of theater activities set up the dramatic moment in which the class in role as director must stage the actors and provide dialogue for how the girl is going to decide on whether or not to let the tormenter drown or be rescued by her. The dialogue is supplemented with the voices of those both found and inferred in the novel. They provide advice to Alice on whether or not to let him drown in the stream or be rescued by her. So for example, her mother, who is never mentioned in the book, might encourage her to kindness and empathy. Whereas, Jane the tart and at times abusive midwife encourages revenge for all the terrible things the boys have done to Alice.

Significant Academic Results

These series of projects studied by independent evaluators from Seton Hall University in South Orange New Jersey resulted in significant academic results.

The study design for each of the three projects (2005 to 2008; 2008 to 2011; 2011 to 2014) included: two levels of randomization at both the school and classroom level. There was a robust sample size with eight schools in the first project, ten in the second and twelve in the third. Schools were evenly and randomly divided into participating and control schools. There were 14 teachers; 14 classrooms in both project and control groups (approximately 480 students in each) each of the 10 years.

Approximately 90% of the students were minority and 80% low income. All of the schools in the project started with low proficiency on standardized state tests in both language arts and math.

Academic performance on state testing in language arts and mathematics were the primary outcomes. Secondary outcome was school engagement and the independent outcome was whether or not students were in the arts integration or traditional classroom. Gender and socioeconomic background were control variables. To study student academic achievement evaluators used random effects logistic regression (covariates were classroom setting, gender and socioeconomic status). Chi Square Analysis measured sustaining effects in post treatment grades such as 8th grade standardized testing.

The following is a sampling of some of the test results (N was approximately 400 each year in both treatment and control randomly selected groups in all three projects (2005 to 2011))

- 90% of 4th and 5th grade students participating for a two-year period passed the NJ standardized Language Arts tests, versus 70% of the control group.
- The percentage of 6th and 7th graders participating for one year scoring proficient was 56.4%; the control group 43.1%.
- Prior to the intervention 3rd grade students passing state ELA tests in the 6 treatment JCP Schools was 38.4%; in the control schools 46.6%. By the final year of project participating 3rd graders passing the state tests was 64%; while control group students passing rate was 51.7%.