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Art Integration into the General Education Classroom

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Ever since the public school system was established in America, elementary schools have offered separate art classes in addition to the core curriculum being taught, but throughout the years, policy makers argue about the importance of art education. In fact, only 20 out of 48 states that have content standards in the arts mandate arts education (Chapman, 2005, p. 118). It seemed hopeful in the mid 1990's that strides to include art in the general education system would be permanent with the passing of the Educate America Act, which included art as a core academic subject saying it was a necessity for student's learning, but it seems as though people are never satisfied with our education system because it is always changing with new polies taking place. In 2001, No Child Left Behind was passed which required schools to increase testing and test scores in reading, mathematics, and science in exchange for federal funds. Unfortunately, this law does not support art education with the funding it needs to have an impact on learning (Chapman, 2005, p. 118). Many began to view art as only an enrichment, claiming that it was fun but not necessary for learning. Because of the lack of funding, it is common that art programs in schools are the first programs that are cut when funding is scarce. Educators have been working to find the best ways to bring art back into the school system. One of these methods that has become popular recently is Art Integration.

What exactly is art integration then? The most basic definition is that art integration is the "infusion of visual and performing arts activities into instruction in

non arts subjects" which is the basis of what most researchers believe (Hardiman, Rinne, & Yarmolinskaya, 2014, p. 144). Bohannon (2010) argues that art integration is a "shift away from emphasizing the differences between the arts and other subjects toward making connections between them" which enables the student to "transfer and connect knowledge from one subject to another" (p. 27). This started the discussion of having a type of education where curriculum is not broken up between subjects, but rather students are able to "engage in a creative process, which connects an art form to another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both" (Marshall, 2014, p. 105). While most authors come to a similar conclusion when defining art integration, LaJevic (2013) expands it by describing it as "merging art with (an)other discipline(s) is an attempt to open up space of inclusiveness in teaching, learning, and experiencing", she also goes on to agree with previous authors in that visual art integration "recognizes the educational curriculum as a whole; it does not divide the curriculum into distinct parts" (p. 2). Most research on visual art integration has been conducted in elementary schools because each classroom has one teacher teaching every subject, so realistically, elementary schools would be the most likely option for art integration to occur and be beneficial.

One of the benefits researchers have found about art integration is the positive affects it has on student's retention rate as well as cognitive development. When discussion about art integration began to take place, researchers began to investigate if this would actually help the student's

learning and what they found is extraordinary. They collected their data through various ways. The most common were conducting experiments and observing classroom situations. In 2014, a group of researchers set out to test the effectiveness of arts integrated curricula. From this, a small study was conducted among fifth graders who were in an arts integrated science classroom using an arts integrated group and a control group. For visual arts, in particular, they drew responses instead of writing them because “pictures tend to be remembered better than words” (Hardiman, Rinne, & Yarmolinshaya, 2014, p. 145). For vocabulary, the students created simple drawings in elaborating meaning of words. From this experiment, they found that the students who were in the arts integrated classrooms had a better retention rate. Hardiman, Rinne, & Yarmolinshaya (2014) found that the students who had a basic reading proficiency level had a 97.6% retention rate whereas the students with the same reading level in the control group only had a 72.0% retention rate. Scripp & Paradis (2014) also conducted a similar study and found in their research that “arts integration programs can improve academic performance as well as close the achievement gap” (p. 16).

Many researchers have based their findings off of Vygotsky’s and Piaget’s previous theories about cognitive development and Howard Garner’s theories of multiple intelligence, and psychologists and researchers are continuing to build upon both of these mentioned concepts. Baker (2013), believes that the arts “create meaningful links with concepts being taught through active learning activities” and that through the arts, critical thinking develops (p. 2). According to Vygotsky’s theories, the elementary school years are critical to children’s cognitive development, and it is important to make the connection between

instruction and learning because cognitive development is influenced greatly by teacher instruction (Baker, 2013, p. 5). Baker (2013) conducted a study at an Art Space Charter School designed to examine the cognitive elements in an arts integrated curriculum. He received the majority of his data from observations and learned that certain cognitive factors can develop with the use of art elements. Visual arts, drawing and constructing, when integrated, can lead to the development of cognitive skills such as planning, visual-spatial, verbal reasoning, vocabulary, nonverbal reasoning, and quantitative learning. Though this study was a small scale study, it showed that instruction with the arts can provide a complex form of learning for children “that promotes conceptual and intellectual development through their inter-relatedness to overall instructional concepts and objective” (Baker, 2013, pp. 13-14). Marshall (2005) agrees that “connections are at the core of cognition and consciousness” meaning the more connections made across the subjects, the more cognition will occur in students (p. 229).

Although most scholars believe that art integration is important and necessary to schools and students, many argue that most general education teachers are not qualified to successfully integrate art into the general education classroom. LaJevic (2013) emphasizes that many teachers have good intentions when incorporating the arts, but it becomes a problem when “the arts are not sufficiently connected to student learning or treated less seriously than other subjects” (p. 3). Chapman (2005), states that only 55% of schools have at least one full-time certified teacher of the visual arts, and 92% of the elementary classroom teachers said they also taught art but only 10% had a major or minor in art. Many students and schools are not getting the benefits that art provides because most general education classroom

teachers do not have the knowledge or skill to “ensure that art learning is sound in content, standards based, and systematically assessed”, but because of the lack of art programs in the schools, general education teachers are being encouraged to assist in the arts (Chapman, 2005, p. 131). Teachers try to incorporate art into their classroom because of the significant benefits it offers and often believe they are successfully integrating art into their classroom, but they are often only devaluing the arts. LaJevic (2013) claims that she found through her observations that the arts are mainly being devalued in the schools because they are only being used as decorative purposes, and teachers are also diluting the arts in art integration. “It has been well documented that teachers, particularly elementary generalist teachers, do not typically have the educational background or preparation to provide standards-based arts instruction” so can we blame teachers for at least trying to integrate art in their classrooms (Saraniero, Goldberg, & Hall, 2014, p. 3)? Some specific examples LaJevic (2013) found showing that the arts are being devalued in the schools were that most arts she found were “teacher-driven finished product with which to adorn the walls” and it reveals “a narrow understanding of art” (pp. 7, 9). She also states that “Art Integration was often used to fill up extra class time in the schedule and was viewed as fun busy-time doings” mainly because successfully integrating art requires knowledge among the standards and carefully planned lessons (Lajevic, 2013, p. 10).

Many teachers do not understand the concept of art in the classrooms mostly because of their lack of knowledge being as though “it was not part of their own education” (LaJevic, 2013, p. 3). The answer to this argument is professional development. “Longer and embedded professional development also appears to

have benefits for students, particularly those whose teachers are learning about arts integration” (Saraniero, Goldberg, & Hall, 2014, p. 3). Scripp & Paradis (2014) believe that it all begins with professional development practices claiming that it leads to “greater quality of student work documentation and a reflective understanding of arts integration concepts” (p. 15). Professional development will help the students and the teacher succeed because it increases teacher confidence and knowledge in the arts which in return helps the students academically. Saraniero, Goldberg, & Hall (2014) state that through their research on teacher professional development, the coaching intervention, which is where teachers attended a summer institute and were coached 25 hours during the school year, “appeared to have made the most impact on teacher confidence and use of arts integration” (p. 8). For general education teachers to be able to successfully integrate art into the curriculum, they must have some type of professional development to ensure they are providing their students with quality instruction.

When considering how and to what extent art should be integrated into the classroom, it is important to acknowledge the positive connection between learning and creativity. Art can be related to each subject in the curriculum separately, but it also has the ability to connect across all subjects. “Art and art integration flourish on the borders between disciplines; they find and fill those interstitial spaces with new forms of art and new forms of pedagogy” (Marshall, 2014, p. 108). This doesn’t just happen though, it takes time and determination by the teacher to create carefully planned lessons that are also innovative and exciting (LaJevic, 2013, p. 3). Because most of the research that has been done on art integration has been completed in classroom settings, they

provide their lessons they used to integrate art. Bohannon (2010) states that “it is easy for students to become disinterested in school when there is no relationship among the subjects” (p. 28). Because of this, she provides lessons for teachers to implement in their own classrooms that are centered around one art technique that applied to the subjects of math, social studies, and reading. They used the visual elements of line and contour to integrate into the curriculum. For math, discussion of geometry and how lines make up different shapes can lead to students creating their own growth chart. Social studies is similar because the students can create timelines and graphs, draw the shapes of states or countries, and discuss latitude and longitude. In learning about line and contour, students can create a relationship with reading from left to right, and can write sentences in different types of

line movements for example zigzag and up to down (Bohannon, 2010, p. 28).

Thus, if art integration is to increase in the elementary school systems, more research and increased professional development must be done. Research, up until this date, has been conducted to show the positive affects that art integration has on both long term retention rate as well as cognitive development, but these were small scale studies. Larger, more specific studies need to be researched in order to gain a more positive outlook on visual art in schools. Every child should have the opportunity to excel in school, and with further research, school systems and teachers will be able to better understand the best way to integrate art, and design new methods and programs that can assist in these efforts.

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