

**Increasing the School Engagement and Oral Language Skills of ELLs  
through Arts integration in the Primary Grades**

Liane Brouillette  
University of California, Irvine

Karen Childress-Evans  
San Diego Unified School District

Briana Hinga  
University of California, Irvine

George Farkas  
University of California, Irvine

**Abstract.** *In this article, we look at the impact of an arts integration program offered at five large urban elementary schools on the daily attendance and oral language skills of children in kindergarten through second grade. Many of the children attending these schools spoke a language other than English at home. Teaching artists visited each class weekly for 28 weeks, co-teaching theater and dance lessons with the teacher. School engagement was measured by comparing attendance on days with and without scheduled arts lessons. Attendance was significantly higher on days the artists visited; absences were reduced by 10 percent. Speaking and listening skills were measured through standardized test scores. Qualitative analysis of interview and survey data revealed that teachers perceived the theater and dance lessons to provide rich opportunities for verbal interaction between teachers and pupils. Student speaking and listening skills improved significantly, as did teachers' ability to promote oral language.*

Supporters of arts programs routinely assert that the arts enhance student engagement. A report from the President's Committee on Arts and the Humanities (PCAH) (2011) suggested that investing in arts-rich schools might help to address persistently high dropout rates. U.S. dropout rates, which fluctuate between 25 percent and 30 percent nationally, reach 50 percent among male students from disadvantaged minority groups (EPE Research Center, 2010; Swanson, 2009). This report offers readers an inviting vision of arts-rich schools that are "alive with the energy of creative thinking and fresh ideas ... in which students who may have fallen by the wayside find themselves re-engaged in learning" (PCAH, 2011, p. 54).

The PCAH report recognizes the profound impact artistic experience can have on social development. This article will build on that insight by looking at how the creative energy of the arts might be infused into the curriculum from the earliest grades, reshaping the culture of schools to serve pro-social goals. Thompson and Bales characterized preschool drawing as "a performance unfolding in time, in which speech and gesture, word and image, are intertwined" (1991, 43). Even when drawing alone at their desks, the behavior of young children reflects social practices; talking to themselves, they mimic social speech. Children's imaginative activities not only encourage a heightened awareness of others' reactions and expectations, but also help to hone social skills that can foster academic success.

Unfortunately, recent trends in early elementary education have provided little opportunity for such artistic exploration. As soon as children arrive at school, they are expected to put aside dramatic play and sit quietly at desks. Kindergarten classrooms have come to resemble the first-grade classrooms of past decades, emphasizing formal reading and math instruction instead of play and socialization (Elkind 1986; Hatch and Freeman 1988; Plevyak and Morris 2002; Shepard and Smith 1988; Walsh 1989). Opportunities for imaginative engagement have been greatly diminished. The PCAH report envisions a school environment in which this situation is reversed and imaginative engagement is valued and nurtured.

### **Testing the PCAH Claims**

The PCAH vision stands in stark contrast to the sober assessment offered by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2009), which reports that research on the effect of arts education on student outcomes remains inconclusive. We hypothesized that the gloomy nature of the GAO assessment might be due to over-generalization, lumping together disparate interventions and outcomes, without paying attention to the quality of the intervention or whether the assessment chosen was appropriate to the arts intervention. Therefore, we focused on whether a single intervention *could* increase both student engagement and academic outcomes.

We scrutinized the impact of a large urban arts integration project, looking at two types of student outcomes: 1) student engagement, as measured by daily attendance; and 2) student achievement, as measured by scores on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). To address the first outcome, we utilized a quasi-experimental design to investigate whether a causal link could be found between the arts program and increased student attendance at five diverse urban elementary schools. The attendance research took place as part of the first wave of a longer project. To address the second outcome, we chose a measure that specifically focused on the achievement of a vulnerable population: children who spoke a language other than English at home. The CELDT is a test taken by all English language learners (ELLs) in California until they are reclassified as English proficient. To capture students when their attitudes toward school were still being formed, we looked at children in the primary grades.

Engagement in the early grades is especially important, as research shows that absenteeism among kindergarten students is associated with negative first grade outcomes and later school dropout (Peek, 2009). This research took place as part of the second wave of this project, which included random assignment of schools to treatment and control groups, making it possible to look at causality.

Both studies were carried out in the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD), although with different sets of schools. The second-largest school district in California, SDUSD faces the sort of urban challenges that PCAH envisions arts-rich schools being able to address. Of the 133,183 students served by the district, 28 percent were English language learners (ELLs); 64.9 percent were eligible for free or reduced lunch; 15,093 received special services; Latino students made up 46.4 percent of the student population; Whites made up 23.5 percent; Filipino, Indo-Chinese, and other Asian students made up 14.2 percent; African Americans made up 10.3 percent; and 5.3 described themselves as multi-racial.

The following section addresses the first outcome: engagement as measured by attendance. This was explored in a study that included not only analysis of attendance data, but also 42 interviews with teachers, mentor-teachers and principals concerning their perceptions of the school context and the impact of the arts integration project. The research on student achievement will be discussed in the second half of this article.

### **Engagement and Student Attendance**

School engagement as defined by Finn (1993) includes both behavioral and emotional components. The behavioral component includes participation in classroom and school activities (e.g., school attendance and appropriate response to directions and assignments) (Finn, 1993; Finn, Pannozzo, & Voelkl, 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997). The emotional component involves a feeling of belonging at school (Finn, 1993) and is likely to be associated with increased school engagement, if such engagement is rewarded (Goodenow, 1992; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989) in ways that are meaningful to the child.

The PCAH report cites research showing that almost half of all students (both those with high grades and those who drop out) say their classes are not interesting, with over two-thirds saying they are not inspired to work hard and that too little is expected of them (Bridgeland *et al.*, 2006). Lack of interest and motivation correlate with absenteeism and school dropout. Students show the signs of being at risk for dropping out as early as sixth grade in the form of high rates of absenteeism, low levels of engagement, failing grades, and disruptive behaviors (Child Trends DataBank, 2010; Pytel, 2008).

Latino and African American students are of special concern, since their absenteeism and dropout rates are higher than those for Asians and Whites (Fischer, Frey, Lapp, 2011), and this is consistently observed from elementary school to the college level (Halpern, 2007; Nelson, 2005). New immigrants are another vulnerable population. According to U.S. Census figures, the proportion of children of immigrants among the school-age population grew from 6 percent in 1970 to 19 percent in 2000 (Capps et al. 2005). The nation's overall K-12 school population grew less than 3 percent from 1995 to 2005, but the population of English language learner students increased 56 percent during that period (Batalova, Fix, & Murray 2007).

Arts education may be one mechanism by which student engagement can be increased. Evidence for such an increase exists at the high school level. A study of high school students showed that students' self-reported engagement was higher during art class than in eight

comparison classes (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). Arts advocates also draw on a century of clinical and academic research by scholars such as Maslow (1968), Herzberg (1987), and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) that points to the conclusion that interest and pride in one's work are powerful motivators, leading to high engagement. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1980) describe the inherently rewarding, balanced state of interaction with a task that they refer to as *flow*:

Flow is described as a condition in which one concentrates on a task at hand to the exclusion of other internal and external stimuli. Action and awareness merge, so that one simply does what has to be done without a critical, dualistic perspective on one's actions. Goals tend to be clear, means are coordinated to the goals, and feedback to one's performance is immediate and unambiguous (p. 64).

Jones (2011) has found that affective engagement precedes school identification and behavioral commitments to learning. Further, engagement is important, not only in terms of absenteeism and dropout rates, but also because of the link between engagement and academic achievement. Attendance has been shown to be positively related to academic achievement, including test scores (Barrington, Hendricks, 1989; Johnston, 2000, Lamdin, 1996) and school persistence (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004). Arts education often gives students an opportunity for greater class participation. Fisher, Frey, & Lapp (2011) found a change in instruction from teacher-dominated discourse to invited-student talk changed patterns of absence and helped bridge reading and test score gaps for racial minorities.

High quality arts programs have been shown to enhance student engagement and social-emotional development (Brouillette, 2010; Catterall & Peppler, 2007). Activities like drama and dance help children to recognize, label, manage, and communicate about their emotions, as well as to perceive and try to understand others' emotions. In this way, children build skills that connect them with family, peers, and teachers. These developing capacities help children negotiate increasingly complex social interactions, participate effectively in relationships and group activities, and enjoy the social support that is crucial to healthy human development. Young children who exhibit healthy social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment are more likely to do well academically in elementary school (Cohen et al. 2005; Zero to Three, 2004). Success in elementary school leads to success in later grades.

If students are to be academically successful, engagement is pivotal. Rufo (2011) observed that allowing elementary students more choices with materials and assignments gives teachers enhanced ways of assessing their students' progress, creativity, and learning—creating a greater sense of mutuality. Green and Kindseth (2011) echoed these ideas, looking at how the arts involve students in their own learning and open “capacities to act with a sense of agency and vision in their lives” (p. 38). Weiss (2006) argued that introducing the arts enables teachers to refine their practice by identifying the arts integration that can best address students' literacy learning needs.

Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga looked at children and adolescents in 8<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades, using the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS: 88), a panel study that at the time of the original analysis had followed more than 25,000 students in American secondary schools for four years. Based on this analysis, Catterall *et al* made three far-reaching observations. First, children engaged in the arts showed positive academic development, with the comparative gains for arts-involved youth becoming more pronounced over time. Second, students who reported consistently high levels of involvement in instrumental music over the

middle and high school years showed significantly higher levels of mathematics proficiency by grade 12. Third, sustained student involvement in theatre arts was associated with gains in reading proficiency, self-concept and motivation, as well as higher levels of empathy for others. These patterns held for students from all socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds.

Catterall (2009) tracked the students who were assessed in his earlier work into early adulthood. The result was a 12-year longitudinal study that followed 12,000 students from high school to age 26, examining comparative achievements and values development for those highly involved in the arts during school versus students with little or no arts engagement. Findings showed that intensive involvement in the arts during middle and high school was associated with higher levels of achievement and college attainment, and also with indications of pro-social behavior such as volunteerism and political participation. Overall, students in arts-rich schools (including ELLs) progressed in formal education after high school more quickly, earned more degrees by age 26, and felt more positively that their postsecondary experiences had benefited them in the world of work.

In sum, regardless of the racial composition or socioeconomic status of the student population, arts education has been shown to correlate positively with writing, reading, and science proficiency test scores and to correlate negatively with dropout rates (Cirillo, DeMuro, & Young, 2008; Fehr, 2008).

### **Description of the Arts Intervention**

In 2007-11, the first wave of the K-2 Teaching Artist Project in San Diego was funded by an Improving Teacher Quality grant administered by the California Department of Education. In 2010, funding from an Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination (AEMDD) grant made it possible to extend this project to 15 more schools and to randomly assign schools to treatment and control groups. In the pilot project, the focus was on teacher perceptions of the program's effectiveness and on student engagement. In this teacher professional development project, teaching artists co-taught 27 weekly lessons (nine visual art, nine theater, nine dance) with classroom teachers in the teachers' own classrooms. (California content standards use "theater" to both classroom drama and play production.) The year after co-teaching these 50-minute lessons, teachers taught the same lessons on their own. The goal was to provide K-2 teachers in high-poverty schools with the content area knowledge and pedagogical skills necessary to:

- Engage their students in standards-based instruction in the visual and performing arts for at least one hour per week during the school year;
- Utilize arts-based teaching techniques that engaged English language learners;
- Provide English language learners with rich opportunities to engage in meaningful interpersonal interactions using oral English.

The project was initiated in response to a Stanford Research Institute report (Woodworth *et al.*, 2007) that found that, where visual and performing arts education had not been eliminated at the elementary level in California schools, it was most often delivered by generalist teachers who had inadequate training in the arts. In California, state policy assigns responsibility for elementary school arts instruction to the classroom teacher. In San Diego, the K-2 Teaching Artist Project (TAP) was initiated to expand the availability of high-quality arts instruction to schools that lacked the resources to hire full-time art specialists. The collaborative design team

included curriculum specialists and resource teachers from the San Diego Unified School District, along with researchers from the University of California, Irvine. (Please see end of article for URLs of web pages with lesson plans, as well as streaming videos of lessons.)

### Research Methods

Our study measures the impact of the arts program on student engagement by comparing attendance on days when arts lessons were offered to attendance on days with no arts lessons. School attendance was specifically chosen as the dependent variable (i.e., a measure of school engagement) for this study because of its relationship to long-term school success. During the 2008-09 school year, eight schools took part in the Teaching Artist Project. All K-2 classes at all of the eight schools received the intervention. The lessons were divided into three 9-week units on visual art, theatre and dance. In five of the schools, all arts lessons at a given grade level were offered on the same day of the week, making it possible to compare student attendance on arts and non-arts days. These five schools were selected for the study.

**Schools.** All five schools were Title I schools in the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD). The number of classes per grade level varied from three to six (with from 50 to 95 children per grade level), depending on the size of the school. Where there was an extra classroom that could be designated as the “arts room,” the teaching artist would bring instructional materials needed for the lessons to the arts room; and classes would rotate through the room throughout the day. Where there was no “arts room,” the teaching artists traveled from classroom to classroom.

Across the five schools, 87.2 percent of students were Latino; English language learners (ELLs) made up 62.4 percent of the students. Most children qualified for free or reduced lunch. Table 1 shows the demographics of these schools in detail. Four out of the five schools had student bodies that were 100 percent socioeconomically disadvantaged; the fifth school was 75 percent disadvantaged. According to the California Education Department glossary, a “socioeconomically disadvantaged” student is defined as one who is without a parent, who received a high school diploma, or who is eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for each school & the district during 2009 – 2010 school year*

School	1	2	3	4	5	District
% White	3.1	0.5	23.5	0.6	0.2	25.3
% African American	3.7	10.6	4.2	22.2	4.2	13.2
% Latino	89.1	87.2	67.5	72.8	94.2	44.4
% Asian	1.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	15.5
% Other	3.1	1.7	4.2	4.38	1.40	1.6
% Socioeconomically disadvantaged	100	100	75.3	100	100	63.7
English Learners	72.6	72.6	44	51.6	71.4	29.3

No. of students enrolled per grade					
K	0	92	32	71	79
1	76	84	21	91	85
2	83	88	30	79	74
No. of students enrolled in K-2	159	264	83	241	238

**Teaching Artists.** The teaching Artists for the K-2 Teaching Artist Project were selected according to their excellence in their arts discipline, their experience working with the California State Visual and Performing Arts Standards and Framework and in the classroom, as well as previous experience working with the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) Department. All teaching artists received ongoing professional development from the VAPA resource teachers.

**Classroom teachers.** In the first wave of the project, schools opted to participate; 80 percent of teachers had to agree for a school to be part of the project. Teacher participants were introduced to TAP during a daylong professional development workshop at the beginning of the school year. A total of 75 classroom teachers were included in this study. About 85 percent of teacher participants were female.

**Attendance data.** The school district provided daily attendance data for each school day in each grade for the five schools where the arts program was implemented during the 2008 – 2009 school year. To best utilize the time of the expert teaching artists, different schools received their teaching artist visits on different days of the week. This meant that arts lessons were distributed across the five days per week and not concentrated on any one weekday.

**Teacher reports.** Data concerning teachers’ perceptions of students in the arts program were gathered through interviews at the end of their first year of involvement with the arts program. All teachers at two representative schools (out of five schools) were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview; 15 teachers (out of 24) agreed to be interviewed. Also, 19 mentor teachers (some from other schools in the program) were interviewed, along with 8 principals.

## Results

The design of this study involved comparing attendance rates on arts days (in relation to the total number of students enrolled in the relevant grade at each school) to the percentage of students attending on days without arts lessons. Because the art lessons given at each school varied across the days of the week, day of the week is not a confounding variable. That is, it is uncorrelated with whether or not a particular day had an art lesson, and thus does not need to be controlled in the analysis of the effects of these lessons. The school, grade, and month of each particular data point (attendance rate on a particular day in a particular school and grade) are controlled for in the analysis.

Table 2. *Daily attendance rate (%) by grade, school, and month*

	Days with art lesson			Days without art		
	mean %	SD	Days	mean %	SD	Days
Kindergarten	94.42	.04	86	93.51	.04	504
1st grade	93.95	.06	101	92.45	.06	603
2nd grade	94.88	.04	106	94.48	.05	620
School 1	93.86	.05	51	93.09	.06	365
School 2	95.51	.05	50	94.83	.03	239
School 3	93.67	.05	96	94.34	.05	381
School 4	93.67	.05	32	92.58	.04	401
School 5	93.47	.04	64	93.09	.05	341
October	95.31	.03	54	95.19	.03	268
November	94.96	.04	39	94.72	.04	157
December	93.18	.05	45	91.76	.06	163
January	94.60	.05	13	92.39	.07	127
February	93.25	.07	33	92.21	.07	200
March	94.11	.05	39	93.27	.05	261
April	95.85	.03	19	94.12	.05	65
May	93.92	.05	33	92.94	.05	229
June	95.56	.03	18	94.16	.04	257
Total:	94.41	.05	293	93.49	.05	1727

In Table 2, the average daily attendance rate across grades, schools, and months of the school year is shown separately for school days with and without art lessons. Across the five schools and three grades where artists were involved in the program, teaching artists were present in the classroom for 293 days; they were absent from the schools for 1,727 days. Across the days with an artist, the average attendance rate was 94.41 percent. Across the days without an artist, the average attendance rate was 93.49 percent. Therefore, a first estimate of the effect of the artists on attendance is the difference in these rates, 0.92 of a percentage point.

When we look separately by month, we see that the largest attendance rate effect occurred in January, when the participation rate on days with artists averaged 94.6 percent, whereas on days without an artist averaged 92.39, for a difference of 2.21 percentage points. This difference is substantial and likely occurred in this month, because the holiday season tends to increase student absenteeism. Also, winter sniffles take a toll at this time of year, creating a situation in which the decision as to whether to send a child to school on a particular day can be a close call. In such situations, a child's plea to be allowed to attend on a certain day can tip the balance. Possibly for similar reasons, the second largest effect is 1.42 percentage

points for December. However, there was an attendance rate effect in every month (Table 3), although it was larger in some months than others.

Table 3. *Regression analysis of the percent of students present on days with arts lessons compared to days without arts lessons*

	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Days <u>with</u> art lesson	.0092*	.0032	.0065*	.0030
Controls:				
1st grade	--	--	-.0138***	.0031
2nd grade	--	--	.0054	.0028
School 2	--	--	.0193***	.0039
School 3	--	--	.0141***	.0034
School 4	--	--	--.0043	.0034
School 5	--	--	-.0012	.0034
November	--	--	-.0044	.0044
December	--	--	-.0318***	.0044
January	--	--	-.0285***	.0050
February	--	--	-.0291***	.0042
March	--	--	-.0185***	.0039
April	--	--	-.0122*	.0061
May	--	--	-.0217***	.0041
June	--	--	-.0078	.0039
Intercept	.9348	.0012	.9495	.0039

\* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

Table 3 shows the results from a regression analysis of attendance rates. The first column shows the results when the only predictor is the dummy variable for the presence of teaching artists. This replicates the overall effect of 0.92 percentage point from Table 2. We see that it is statistically significant at the .05 level, showing that the teaching artist program significantly increased student attendance. The second regression in this table simultaneously controls school, grade, and month, and thus provides the best estimate of program effect. This is a statistically significant 0.65 percentage point.

This is our best estimate of the attendance effect of the program. On average, student

attendance was approximately 0.65 percentage point higher on days and in locations where the teaching artists were present. When we consider that, in these schools and grades, attendance on days with no artist already averaged 93.49 percent (a 6.51 percent absence rate), an increase of .65 is fully a 10 percent reduction in absences on days when the teaching artist was present.

### Perceptions of Teachers and Principals

Transcribed teacher and principal interviews were coded according to Bryant’s (2002) four stages of coding. First, we read the interviews as a whole, looking for major themes and unusual issues. Second, we read the interviews again, this time creating codes and making notes about potential patterns. Third, we systematically marked the text, updated codes, and indicated chunks of text that represented themes. Fourth, we used codes and notes to relate general ideas in the interviews to our research questions and relevant literature.

There was a striking similarity between the perceptions of teachers interviewed and findings of scholars in arts education. In semi-structured interviews, virtually all teachers reported that their students were more engaged in school as a result of participation in the arts lessons provided by the teaching artists. A list of themes consistently mentioned in teacher interviews is displayed in Table 4, along with the percentage of teachers who touched upon it.

Table 4. *Percent of teachers who reported benefits related to arts program*

Frequently Mentioned Theme	% of teachers
Found the art program to be beneficial	93%
Reported that students are behaving better.	93%
Students learn new ways of expressing themselves.	93%
Teachers pleased that students are enjoying themselves.	93%
Students are looking forward to class.	87%
Students are motivated to work by their participation in TAP.	80%
The art program allows students to show teachers what they can do.	80%
The art program engages students.	73%
The art program gives shy students confidence to verbalize in front of others.	73%
Students are proud of their work.	60%
Teachers see their kids in a new light.	53%
Students are having fun learning	53%
The art program makes students want to be in the classroom	53%
Kids who were quiet have blossomed.	47%
Students are experiencing success in ways that might not be possible in other subjects.	47%
The art program lessons boost student self esteem	40%

Of 15 classroom teachers interviewed at the target schools, over 90 percent felt the arts lessons were beneficial and were pleased that their students were enjoying themselves. As one teacher observed: “...The kids are having fun, they like going to school, and the attendance has improved [since the start of the arts program].” A principal explained the benefits he had

observed from the program:

I think art has the role of developing the whole person, not just “How well am I doing sitting down, listening, reading, and writing?” but, “Am I a risk taker?” “Can I help someone who’s having a difficult time?” “Can I express myself?”

Teachers reported that many passive and introverted children found the courage to express themselves during the arts lessons—and afterwards. A teacher commented: “I think engagement is the biggest thing [i.e., benefit of the arts program], because even the shy ones can become engaged.” The effect on shy students was a consistent theme:

- I was surprised that my quiet ones came so alive.
- It boosted the kids' self esteem and gave them new experiences to talk about.
- Everyone seemed to be on a more equal footing ... There was just confidence. I didn't see people hanging back, not in drama or dance.
- I think it changed a lot of them in that they felt more comfortable around each other.

In addition, teachers felt that the arts activities made students feel validated by giving them varied opportunities to express themselves. Children could demonstrate their competencies in ways that went beyond the more rigid assignments in other content areas. For example, when children had trouble discussing a story during the literacy block, teachers would break the class into groups and have them act out the scene. Afterward, students showed better understanding of character motivation and the sequence of events in the plot. As one teacher noted, “They can't usually express themselves.” The teachers found that allowing students more expressive freedom also allowed the teacher to learn more about individual children. This made it easier to engage these students in future class lessons. Typical comments were:

- I remember thinking initially, this student struggles in all these other areas. But then, WOW, he really excelled in visual art.
- I took my shyest girl and put her in the lead. She went through with flying colors. I was so proud of her! She just did it.

More than 90 percent of the classroom teachers reported improved behavior, including less obstructive conduct and more participation in classroom activities. As one teacher noted: “The negative behavior really dropped. It's minimized because they are engaged.” The concept of personal space came up repeatedly, as it was a major component of the dance instruction. In the first lesson, the teaching artist shows children how to avoid collisions with classmates through creating their own “personal bubble.” Each child pretends to blow a soap bubble large enough that he or she can stand inside it with arms outstretched. To keep the bubble from popping, the child must now stay far enough away from the other children so that their bubbles do not touch. This activity was designed to not only avoid collisions, but also to expand each child's awareness of space.

With timely reminders, this sense of personal space could be extended to encompass activities such as walking in line and sitting together on the carpet during story time. One teacher explained: “Personal space is just such a big issue in the beginning of kindergarten. I think that's where my kids flourished.” A second grade teacher observed: “We all agree that these kids need to move. Dance really gave them that opportunity.” A resource teacher noted:

I have a lot of kids who can't keep their hands to themselves. But, when they're dancing, even a kid who's always hitting and kicking on the playground doesn't touch anyone. They have to keep their personal space.

A teacher with a kindergarten/first grade combination class hypothesized:

If you can do [drama and dance] in front of each other, that makes it easier to work as a group. Because you've already been silly and had fun together. It just made the classroom community seem tighter and better.

One aspect of the study that could not be measured was the effect of social context. Like other school districts in California, San Diego had suffered severe budget cuts over a period of several years. Therefore, a grant-funded program that brought teaching artists into schools in low-income neighborhoods offered a welcome respite from what had been an atmosphere of unremitting austerity. The principal of one participating school commented:

It's just brought our students alive and the school alive. I think it was what was needed at this time to get out of the sterile, monotone environment.

Similar reports came from other schools. A kindergarten teacher commented:

I definitely felt they really, really looked forward to it. They never let me forget that Thursday we were doing dance or theater. It was a highlight of their week.

A first grade teacher remembered parents spontaneously mentioning the program:

They loved it so much that my parents even mentioned in conferences how much their children enjoyed it.

That parents valued the program may have contributed to the quantitative findings, given that the attendance of children in the primary grades is strongly influenced by choices made by parents and guardians. Likewise, the budgetary austerity forced upon California's urban school districts by a deep recession may have caused the Teaching Artist Project to have had a stronger impact on school communities than might have been the case in more affluent times, when a wider variety of curricular choices was available. In the following section, these and other aspects of the study are explored in greater depth.

## **Discussion**

These findings add to the literature in three ways. First, the finding that the arts were linked to increased attendance and teacher reports of student engagement provides evidence that the arts helped to create a positive academic environment for students. Second, this finding casts doubt on policies that remove the arts from low-performing schools with the goal of improving student outcomes. Such policies will need to be reevaluated if further studies show that the arts play a positive role in promoting academic engagement, an important predictor of long-term academic success and retention (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004). Third, teachers consistently pointed out that the arts lessons made the curriculum more inclusive by providing students, especially ELLs, with multiple ways to show what they know.

Children in all of the treatment schools had rates of attendance well over 90 percent, even before the project. This allowed limited room for improving attendance, given the predictable occurrence of childhood illnesses that keep even the most enthusiastic students at home. Therefore, the effect of the program in significantly increasing average attendance on days and in locations where the teaching artists were present was not only statistically

significant but an educationally significant achievement. As one teacher observed:

When we acted it out, more of the kids were engaged, even the kids who couldn't say the words yet. At the beginning of the year, they copy movements. Eventually, they understand how to say that, using language.

Since all of the schools in this study were Title 1 schools with large ELL populations, there was a widespread preoccupation with avoiding or climbing out of school improvement under No Child Left Behind. The teachers spontaneously mentioned the negative impact of an over-emphasis on standardized testing. As one teacher explained: "For me, it's bringing the fun back in the classroom. The children are moving. Before (all the testing) there used to be more ways for children to learn." Other teachers ruefully observed that, in schools that had been designated as in need of improvement under NCLB, the re-organized classroom schedule afforded little time for students to express themselves in ways that were not directly related to testing outcomes. The findings of the current study add to the existing evidence that such reasoning is self-defeating. The arts are essential to engaging elementary school students with the curriculum.

### **Limitations of Attendance Study**

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between student engagement and the arts in a rigorous manner. A comparison of the attendance of children in five urban elementary schools on arts days and non-arts days showed arts lessons to have a statistically significant, positive effect on attendance (a 10 percent reduction in absences on arts days). Yet, other contextual factors may have had an impact. Children's strong enthusiasm for the arts program might be rooted not only to the attractiveness of the arts lessons as a time to explore new means of self-expression, but also, in part, in the lack of alternative enrichment activities—one result of a continuing state-wide budget crisis.

Would the weekly visits of the teaching artists have stood out as vividly in children's minds had a variety of other choices been available? Perhaps this would not be the case. The school in the study with the lowest poverty level was the only school where attendance was not higher on arts days (Table 2). So, what does our evidence suggest? In a bare-bones instructional environment, where choices are limited, high-quality arts instruction can create a sense of enhanced school engagement that boosts student attendance. This is very much the sort of effect predicted in the PCAH (2011) report, which envisioned a situation in which students "who may have fallen by the wayside find themselves re-engaged in learning" (p. 54).

### **Impact of Teaching Artist Project on Student Achievement**

An article about TAP published in *The Reading Teacher* (Greenfader & Brouillette, 2013)<sup>1</sup> included a comparison of ELL achievement at five of the 15 schools that participated in the second wave of the Teaching Artist Project with a matched group of control schools. The five treatment schools used in the study had been randomly selected from the district's Title 1 (high poverty) schools. Control schools did not receive TAP lessons or an assigned condition; they conducted "business as usual." The outcome variables were the Speaking and Listening subtests and the overall score on the 2010–2011 California English Language Development Test

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<sup>1</sup> The full article can be downloaded, free of charge (quantitative analysis in on last page): <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/TRTR.1192/abstract>

(CELDT), a test taken by all ELLs in California until they are reclassified as English proficient.

The results of this study indicated statistically significant benefits for kindergarteners on Listening and Speaking assessments ( $p < .05$ ) and benefits for first graders on the overall CELDT score ( $p \leq .10$ ) that fell somewhat short of statistical significance. These results were for the first year of a three-year study in which the second grade was not included because of delays in accessing CELDT data. Further analysis is underway as of this writing, with the final results not yet available. However, preliminary findings are consistent with the results reported above, with significant results found in kindergarten, then tapering off to less than ( $p < .05$ ) in first and second grade. Given that the intervention was for just one hour per week over 28 weeks, TAP was considered by the school district to be highly successful.

For many local arts education advocates, one important lesson derived from the study was that a common justification for cutting arts programs—the claim that low-performing schools could not afford to take the time away from language arts and math—had been shown to be wrong. Standards-based arts lessons could boost the English language development of ELLs. However, the study described above did not look at the same version of the Teaching Artist Project originally implemented in 2007. The visual arts were dropped in order to spend more time on drama, and the dance lessons were revised to focus more on oral language.

This section explains: 1) how a study that included the random assignment of a large urban district's Title 1 schools to treatment and control groups came to be implemented, given that such a design is unusual in arts integration research; and 2) the changes that were made in the original design of the project. The explanation is two-fold. The first part is rooted in earlier reforms in the San Diego district. From 1998 to 2005, under Superintendent Alan Bersin, SDUSD implemented a Blueprint for Student Success that has been described as “among the most closely watched and hotly debated of the early years of the No Child Left Behind Act,” (Sparks, 2010, p. 1). Anthony Alvarado, from New York City's highly regarded District 2, was brought to San Diego to serve as chancellor for instruction. Alvarado introduced the Balanced Literacy method that had been successfully used in District 2 (and later became the model for New York schools under Mayor Bloomberg). The grant that funded the first wave of the Teaching Artist Project was awarded two years after Bersin left and was able to build on the interest in literacy research encouraged among school staff as part of Balanced Literacy.

The second part of the explanation is rooted in a debate about “What Research Actually Shows about Arts Education and Academic Outcomes,” the topic of a conference at the Getty Center in August, 2000,<sup>2</sup> as well as a special issue of the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (2000). At the time, considerable publicity had been given to claims that the arts positively affect the development of higher cognitive powers. At the conference and in the special journal issue, researchers Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland shared the findings of a team they directed under the umbrella of Harvard Project Zero. Using meta-analysis, they had looked at the transfer of learning from an aesthetic to a non-aesthetic domain. At the time, conference participant James Catterall of UCLA was working with one of the authors of this article on a joint UC Irvine/UCLA doctoral program; while serving together on the dissertation committees of several graduate students who were examining issues related to arts education, they had the opportunity to discuss research on the transfer of arts learning to other academic outcomes. In 2007 when the opportunity came to collaborate with San Diego USD on a large arts integration project, it seemed natural to examine unresolved questions regarding the transfer of arts learning.

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<sup>2</sup> Proceedings of the conference were published in 2001.

## Literacy Reforms in San Diego

In 2010, the first evaluation of the long-term effects of Superintendent Bersin's sweeping reform program in San Diego showed that struggling elementary and middle school students who had been given extra time for reading had made sizable gains in literacy (Betts, Zau, & Koedel, 2010). The program was less successful with ELLs. However, Alan Bersin's tenure as superintendent had ended five years earlier.

Bitter, O'Day, Gubbins, and Socias (2009) looked specifically at San Diego's literacy reforms and determined that verbal interaction was limited, even in the district's "balanced literacy" program. The design of the program emphasized employment of *accountable talk*, an interactive learning strategy designed to foster student-led discussion and help students draw meaningful connections between text and prior knowledge. Yet, the researchers found that, in practice, it was primarily the teacher, not the students, who directed this talk. Students did not engage in interactive dialogue with one another, but, instead, responded directly to the teacher with little elaboration. The study found that reading instruction accounted for 87.3% of literacy instruction segments, with an average of 11.6% focused on composition and writing. This left little time (1.1%) for oral language instruction, phonics, and so forth. This may have been part of the reason that ELLs did not benefit more from the program.

When the initial proposal for the Teaching Artist Project was submitted in 2007,<sup>3</sup> the study by Bitter *et al* (2009) had not yet been released. However, the San Diego USD Office of Literacy Acquisition was aware of the need to provide ELLs with more opportunities for verbal interaction. For young English language learners (ELLs), the quality and volume of oral language use promoted by teachers is critical (Peisner-Feinberg *et al.*, 2001). These children need frequent opportunities to engage in structured academic talk with teachers or peers who know English well and can provide accurate feedback (Francis, Rivera, Lesaux, Kieffer, Rivera, 2006; Gersten *et al.*, 2007). The challenge classroom teachers faced was how to manage this.

At a time when tight budgets have resulted in rising class sizes, teachers face a challenge in finding ways to verbally engage with each of 20 or 30 children for more than a few moments each day. What the K-2 Teaching Artist Project provided was a missing piece of the puzzle: an effective and engaging way for teachers in the primary grades to engage in structured academic talk with their students. The playful atmosphere of the K-2 theatre and dance lessons provided an enjoyable opportunity for this type of ongoing interpersonal engagement. In the theater and dance warm-up, the teacher interacts with the whole group at once. If children misunderstand instructions, they instantly see the difference between their response and that of the rest of the class—and self-correct. During guided practice, children interact in small groups while the teacher moves from group to group, acting as coach and facilitator.

During the first wave of the project, however, teachers pointed out that improvements could be made. Although students had enjoyed the visual art lessons, there was little verbal interaction as children painted, molded clay or fashioned collages. Therefore, as the initial grant came to an end, the San Diego Visual and Performing Arts office set about redesigning the lessons so that they would more reliably elicit verbal interaction in the classroom. In 2010, an Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination (AEMDD) grant made possible the

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<sup>3</sup> Initial funding for the K-2 Teaching Artist Project was provided by an Improving Teacher Quality grant awarded by the California Postsecondary Commission. (CPEC has since been disbanded. The grant program is now managed with the California Department of Education.)

implementation of a new version of TAP, in which teachers co-taught 14 theater and 14 dance lessons with teaching artists. The redesigned lessons emphasized verbal interactions between teachers and students. This was the version of the Teaching Artist Project discussed at the start of this section, which showed statistically significant benefits for kindergarteners on Listening and Speaking assessments ( $p < .05$ ) over the period of one year. The next section explores the rationale for this revision and for changes made in the research design.

### **Evolution of the Teaching Artist Project**

The conference held at the Getty Center from August 24 to 26, 2000, focused on a three-year study, the Reviewing Education and the Arts Project, also known as REAP (2000). The study, directed by Ellen Winner and Lois Hetland of Harvard's Project Zero, set out to evaluate the hundreds of existing studies examining the relationship between some form of arts study and some form of academic outcome. This was done through a set of meta-analyses that synthesized empirical evidence about transfer effects from arts to non-arts cognition and learning. The REAP study included only studies that 1) measured some kind of non-arts, cognitive outcome and 2) had a control group. Almost two hundred studies met the criteria for inclusion.

The REAP study found three cases of clear causal links between studying an art form and some kind of non-arts academic outcome: music listening and spatial reasoning, music instruction and spatial reasoning, and classroom drama and verbal skills (Podlozny, 2000). Since only a third of these had a direct connection to traditional academic subjects, much of the publicity around the REAP study focused on how few causal links were found. In speculating about why more causal links were not found, Ellen Winner (2000) noted that all too often the research was atheoretical in that researchers had looked for a connection between arts learning and academic achievement without considering what underlying mechanism might make such a link possible. There are many different possible mechanisms. It is possible that the arts train certain kinds of cognitive skills (such as higher order thinking skills) and that these transfer. It is possible that the arts train working habits, such as perseverance and high standards, and these then transfer. However, it is difficult to justify an investigation of transfer in the absence of a theory of the underlying mechanism that might be at work.

In response to this critique, when designing the first wave of TAP we were careful to spell out the conceptual framework, which had originally been suggested by the Podlozny (2000) study and an influential paper by Wong Fillmore and Snow (2000) that highlighted the key role of oral language. The Podlozny study encouraged us to make drama a focus of the Teaching Artist Project and include dance lessons that were designed to complement the theater lessons (emphasizing listening skills while the theater lessons emphasized speaking skills). However, an equally important goal of the first wave of TAP was to provide students with a full standards-based visual and performing arts curriculum. Music was not included, because the district provided standards-based instrumental music instruction to students in fourth through twelfth grade. However, classroom teachers at the elementary level were expected to provide drama, dance and visual art instruction unless a school decided to use its discretionary funding for the arts. In schools that had been designated low-performing under No Child Left Behind, this discretionary funding was usually used to boost test scores.

Winner (2000) also speculated that perhaps the problem lay with the kind of arts programs studied. In none of the research studies was there much of a description of the type of arts instruction received; it is possible that students in many of the studies received weak arts instruction. Perhaps no transfer was found, because the arts had not been well enough taught.

Winner cautioned that researchers in the future needed to describe very clearly the quality of the arts program on which the study was based. Heeding this caution, the Teaching Artist Project made the lesson plans—as well as videos the first nine lessons in both theater and dance being implemented in the classroom—freely available on-line.<sup>4</sup> This allows interested readers to judge for themselves the nature and quality of the arts lessons. The videos are also used by San Diego teachers to remind themselves of details of the lessons.

### **Returning the “Art” to the Language Arts**

[I]f we let ourselves get brainwashed by today’s testing mentality and come to believe that the arts are important only (or even primarily) because they buttress abilities considered more basic than the arts, we will unwittingly be writing the arts right out of the curriculum. We favor arts for the mind’s sake, no less than science and math for the mind’s sake. (Winner, 2000, p. 29)

The cautionary warning from the Winner article quoted above did not turn out to be applicable to our study. As Eliot Eisner (2000) pointed out, anything learned in one context and applied to another can be considered an instance of transfer. Yet we can distinguish between proximal transfer and distal transfer, specific transfer and general transfer, in-domain transfer and out-of-domain transfer. To teach drama and find that students improve their oral language abilities is to say that the skills learned in drama are essentially the same ones that are the focus of the oral language test. Transfer in this case is specific rather than general, proximal rather than distal, in-domain rather than out-of domain. Therefore the result is not surprising, just as it is not surprising when students who utilize math skills in a science class become more skilled in that type of mathematics.

Overall, the role played by the arts in TAP may best be compared to the role that mathematics plays within the sciences. Mathematics is not demeaned as a discipline by the fact that scientists routinely use math as a tool. That mathematics is instrumental in the carrying out of scientific research only adds to (as opposed to subtract from) appreciation for the value of math within our culture. Similarly, using classroom drama to enhance the English language development of ELLs emphasizes the value of the skills taught in the drama curriculum. The focus on standardized testing has caused teachers who feel pressure to prepare children for written tests to feel hesitant about taking time away from reading and writing to teach speaking and listening skills. For the same reason, teacher preparation programs currently devote little time to methods for developing children’s speaking and listening skills. This was why creative drama became a valuable resource for teachers looking for ways to enhance verbal skills.

### **Wave Two: Establishing Causality and Extending Theory**

In the first wave of TAP, we were not able to implement an experimental research design. However, given the enthusiasm of participating teachers and the amount of evidence we had collected in wave one, we hoped for a chance to demonstrate the effectiveness of TAP through using a research design that would better support claims of causality. The district granted permission. So, in 2010 we submitted a proposal for an Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination (AEMDD) grant that would include random assignment of Title 1 schools in San Diego to treatment and control groups. This proposal was funded.

For wave 2, the outside evaluator for the project randomly selected 15 schools from a

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<sup>4</sup> Please see end of article for URLs.

pool of 40 Title 1 schools with large populations of ELLs. We then invited those schools to participate. The one requirement was that 80% of the teachers needed to vote in favor of participating. Of the five schools initially invited to participate the first year, only one school failed to accept. Aside from the research design, the primary difference between the first and second waves of TAP was the curriculum change mentioned earlier. In interviews, teachers had commented that there was more verbal interaction in the theater and dance lessons. Thus, instead of nine theater lessons, nine dance lessons, and nine visual art lessons, each teacher co-taught 14 theater lessons with a teaching artist and 14 dance lessons with a teaching artist. The next year, teachers taught the same lessons with support from the Visual and Performing Arts Department.

Many of our findings confirmed those of earlier researchers. Echoing the Podlozny (2000) study, we found that acting out stories helped children's verbal skills when these were applied to new materials never enacted (CELDT). Findings from the interview and observational components of our study corresponded to four components of Perkins' (2000) "Wellspring Hypothesis" concerning why artistic experiences might be expected to serve as a source of motivation, insight, and cognitive development:

- Sensory anchoring. The learning of young ELLs gained support from a concrete focus on a specific story—and the physical activity of acting it out.
- Instant access. Physical interaction among children acting out the characters allowed them to check ideas by looking or listening to others to learn from their perspectives.
- Personal engagement. The classic stories that the children acted out had survived through the years because they drew and held attention, helping to sustain reflection.
- Dispositional atmosphere. Stories created an atmosphere of heightened affect, thus stimulating involvement that spilled over to foster thinking and learning dispositions.

As Catterall (2001) observed, knowledge in any domain is the result of combinations of accumulated studies and professional knowledge amassed over considerable periods of time. No one study, even a large-scale and influential effort, decides much of anything, even though occasional studies can have the effect of gently knocking a field off its foundations. However, in the final analysis, even blockbuster studies typically interact with existing work and add incrementally to the existing body of knowledge.

In the case of TAP, our understanding of the mechanism through which children's oral language skills were enhanced by the drama and dance lessons was enriched by the conceptual framework put forward by Mages (2006). We found that, when children improvised scenes from stories, they immediately brought their own experiences to bear. Dramatization helped students better understand the plot and the feelings of the characters, even if they did not initially comprehend all of the words. This causal model helped to explain the impact that creative drama had been shown to have on literacy and language development. By using their bodies and voices to dramatize the characters' words and actions, children gained a sense of how interactions among the characters shaped the events described in the story. "In this way they can touch, see, and experience the meaning of the words in the text" (Mages, 2006, p. 335).

As children continued to dramatize stories, they appeared to build a stronger and more direct pathway from the decontextualized language on the page to comprehension of what the words meant. As Harris (2000) explained: "The role player projects him- or herself into the make-believe situation faced by the protagonist" (p. 36). Having fed the make-believe situation

into their own knowledge base, children arrived at feelings and utterances appropriate for that role. By fully engaging their imaginations, children increased their ability to mentally simulate the events, characters, and nuances of a story. Eventually, as the children became better able to project themselves into the make-believe world of the story, they reached a point where they no longer needed dramatization as a scaffold for building up their comprehension.

A majority of participating teachers attributed the enhanced English language development to students “physicalizing” the language. They felt that movement and gesture helped ELLs to learn and remember the vocabulary presented in the lessons. As one teacher commented, “It’s the kinesthetic piece...ELL students are hearing it. They’re doing it. They are understanding it. It’s huge. It’s hearing it and doing it themselves. This is how people learn. It’s different from sitting at the table.”

### **Looking to the Future**

The Teaching Artist Project grew out of a long tradition of excellence in arts education. San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) has long been known for strong arts programs. Instrumental music instruction is provided to students in the upper grades at all of San Diego’s 119 elementary schools. Every elementary site has adopted textbooks, supplies and materials for K-5 music. All but two secondary schools offer music courses. In 2010, 2013 and 2014, San Diego was named one of the Best Communities for Music Education in America by the National Association of Music Merchants. In 2011, the Visual and Performing Arts Department and the Board of Education received the National Arts Education Award from the Kennedy Center for the Arts and the National School Boards Association.

Yet, as elementary schools with large numbers of ELLs came under pressure to raise test scores under the No Child Left Behind legislation, time and funding was diverted from the arts to efforts to raise achievement in language arts and math. What the Teaching Artist Project showed was that, far from taking time away from the endeavor of raising student achievement, well-designed drama and dance classes were an effective way to boost the oral language skills that are pivotal to the English language development of ELLs in the early years of school. The arts classes were also shown to increase student engagement as measured by school attendance.

To get a better idea of the interactions between teaching artists and students during the arts lessons, you may wish to look at classroom videos of the first nine lessons in theater and/or in dance at the kindergarten, first, or second grade level. (Please see below.) The videos continue to be used by San Diego teachers. From September 2013 through April 2014, the videos were viewed for approximately 44,897 minutes. These resources are hosted by the Center for Learning in the Arts, Sciences and Sustainability at the University of California, Irvine. Educators are welcome to make use of the lesson plans and videos, free of charge.

In 2013, the San Diego School Board made the unusual decision to appoint a respected building-level instructional leader—Cindy Marten, principal of Central Elementary School (a school with a 100% poverty level, where 85% of students were ELLs)—as Superintendent. This appointment recognized the success of principals like Marten in creating pockets of excellence throughout the district, while also affirming the district’s commitment to capacity building, making sure that every neighborhood would have a high quality school. With the encouragement of the Board of Education, the Teaching Artist Project has become part of that effort.

### **K-2 Lesson Plans and Classroom Videos of Teaching Artists**

Kindergarten Theater: <http://sites.uci.edu/class/kindergarten/theater-kindergarten/>

Grade 1 Theater: <http://sites.uci.edu/class/first-grade/theater-first-grade/>

Grade 2 Theater: <http://sites.uci.edu/class/second-grade/theater-second-grade/>

Kindergarten Dance: <http://sites.uci.edu/class/kindergarten/dance/>

Grade 1 Dance: <http://sites.uci.edu/class/first-grade/dance-first-grade/>

Grade 2 Dance: <http://sites.uci.edu/class/second-grade/dance-second-grade/>

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