

The Urgency of the Arts in Addressing Student Isolation, Belonging, and Joyful Learning

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Abstract:

Modern schools face constant challenges that require careful attention to both academic and emotional needs of their students. In response, schools and districts across the country are increasingly turning to the arts to build social-emotional learning capacity, increase resilience, boost student achievement, provide students with creative, active learning experiences, and deepen understanding of non-arts subjects. The arts have emerged as a mechanism that brings together cognitive skills of problem solving, idea generation, flexibility, and joyful learning at a time of great need. This article chronicles the experiences of teachers as they integrate the arts to create opportunities for student creativity, empathy, and increased student achievement in arts and non-arts subjects. Recent studies on the capacity for the arts to address flow, interest, effort, and joyfulness are also shared.

As we pass the two-year point, marking the first wave of the pandemic induced school shutdowns, schools continue to struggle with severe staff shortages, teacher burnout, mental health challenges, violence, absenteeism, quarantines, and lost instructional time (Kuhfeld, Soland, Lewis, et al, 2022). Prior to the pandemic, schools were struggling with increasing incidences of school shootings as indicated in a *Psychology Today* article (2018) in which a Santa Fe High School Student was asked by a reporter for a reaction to the recent school shooting. He said what many other students in our nation may be thinking, "It's been happening everywhere. I've always kind of felt like eventually it was going to happen here, too." In response to these national crises, schools and districts across the country are increasingly turning to the arts to build social-emotional learning capacity, increase resilience, boost student achievement, provide students with creative, active learning experiences, and deepen understanding of non-arts subjects. Early efforts to effect change began with The President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities' (2011) published report that highlighted arts integration as an effective strategy for closing achievement gaps. Additional studies have since documented higher levels of engagement and interest in school among students in arts integration schools, as compared to students in matched schools without arts integration programs (Chand O'Neal, 2014). Similar results have been recorded in other research projects that have focused on arts outcomes (Tennessee Arts Commission, 2011; Phillips, Harper, Lee, & Boone, 2011; Lee, 2012).

Over the past several years, Bartlett City Schools in the state of Tennessee have provided teachers and administrators with professional learning opportunities that addressed topics in social-emotional learning by fostering positive changes in classrooms and school environments to increase student confidence (Chand O'Neal, 2017; Lee, 2012). An example is the Arts360 grant program sponsored by the Tennessee Arts Commission. Several schools used funding from this three-year grant to engage teachers in arts integration professional development, teaching artist residencies, and arts performances and master classes. As a result of this work, we have witnessed the power of the arts to create joy, spark creativity, and foster safe, productive learning environments, particularly for students with learning challenges, as well as for those who come from marginalized and high poverty neighborhoods.

To assess the impact of arts integration in a Title 1 elementary school located in Bartlett, Tennessee, a qualitative study was conducted using survey responses to a pre-post arts attitude survey (McDonald, 2010) and follow up interview questions. The constructed responses from selected teachers are included in this article. The narrative data reveal the thoughts of the teachers as they worked with artists and performers to engage their students in arts-focused learning.

The research addresses three key questions:

1. What do teachers in Title 1 schools do to develop joyful, engaging learning conditions?
2. How is the stage set in classroom environments to sustain student engagement?
3. How are social emotional needs of students addressed through arts education?

The Role of Language

High poverty environments have been shown to negatively impact language development in young children (Perkins, Finegood, & Swain, 2013). To address this gap, studies in arts integration document how the arts parallel symbol systems that support language development and cognition, which affects students across multiple achievement levels (Brouillette, 2012). In addition, current research documents that the arts access cognitive pathways in ways that are different and often more effective than conventional language pathways (Anderson, 2017).

Amber, a fourth-grade teacher, works in a co-teaching classroom with a special education teaching specialist. Amber uses theatre arts and visual arts teaching techniques in her class to foster higher levels of communication and to provide students with multiple ways to access content. When asked in an interview about the advantages that the arts provide for students with specific learning challenges, she said:

Students with specific learning challenges may be challenged if a teacher teaches a lesson only orally because they need many ways to explore and experiment in the lesson to learn/create. Students with specific learning challenges do not often master the general education classroom objective on the first teach. A lot of times these students need multiple reteach sessions. I have found with arts-integrated lessons I am re-teaching these students less (A. Stanley, personal communication, May 3, 2018).

Christine, a music teacher at an arts integrated elementary school working with students with special needs, shared her experience on how the use of language is essential in helping students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) anticipate what is coming next in a lesson:

For learners with ASD: Use simplified language. Try to establish routines that help the learner anticipate what comes next. Use a system of rewards such as stickers, edibles, or preferred activities. Show visuals in conjunction with new vocabulary. Understand that children learn by doing (C. Hughes, personal communication, May 3, 2018).

Amber and Christine understand the need to address specific student needs, while at the same time providing the entire class with alternative ways to display understanding, such as Total Physical Response (TPR), an assessment strategy

developed by James Asher (2009) that combines verbal response with physical movement.

How Students Create Meaning

Cornett (2014) has written many articles and books on how the arts can be used to help students create meaning in non-arts subjects. Candyce, a kindergarten teacher, commented in a reflection journal on how her students found meaning in a language arts and music integrated songwriting unit:

I use music for many learning skills but had never had the students come up with their own song. I wasn't sure what that would look like, but in the end, it was fun because it was so meaningful to them. As a kindergartner, it is important to be excited about, and have positive feelings toward, learning (Foust, 2017).

Candyce collaborated with the school's music instructor to design a lesson that would mirror the songwriting process experienced by kindergarten students in the music classroom. In Candyce's lesson, the students created meaning through making personal connections to the content by writing song lyrics about butterflies. The class also listened to music selected by the teacher and created movement based on the musical pieces. The material was then connected to punctuation and capitalization as students labeled the parts of a butterfly. It is reasonable to expect that the creation of meaning would also be useful to our students who are trying to create alternative narratives as they find ways to adapt to traumatic events.

The Joy of Learning and Teaching

Recent studies have documented the importance of student choice, positivity, a positive disposition, and joyfulness in supporting successful learning (Chand O'Neal, Tadik, & Braman, 2023; Gay & Dahlmeier, 2011; Kelly. Hills, Huebner & McQuillin, 2012). While joy may not be thought of as a learning strategy, per se, the presence of joy in arts-integrated classrooms has been documented several times in educational research, teacher journals, in focus group conversations, and in teacher surveys. Carol Ames, Dean of the College of Education at Michigan State University, states that, rather than quantitative changes such as requiring students to spend measurably more hours with books or worksheets, it is qualitative changes, such as how students view themselves in relation to a learning task that has the potential to change student outcomes. When students engage in the process of learning by actively making choices and seeing the benefits of their choices, they have a more connected and authentic response to learning activities and situations (Chand O'Neal, Tadik, & Braman, 2023; Kohn, 2006). This point was made clear in a study conducted with Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) high school students touched by the federal prison system, in which the school district chose restorative arts as an intervention to increase student interest and engagement in school. Results revealed that student interest and engagement in school increased significantly by 4% in 18-22 hours of student-choice restorative arts instruction demonstrating. This demonstrates that when students exercise choice, their likelihood to

shift to a positive mindset increases, resulting in an elevated enjoyment in learning. In addition, they are much more likely to actively engage with the content being taught and to retain it longer (Chand O'Neal, Tadik, & Braman, 2023; Rinne, Yarmolinskaya, Gregory, & Hardiman, 2011). In light of this evidence, how can we address the current trauma caused by the pandemic and school shootings and apply these findings to set the stage for joyful learning in the classroom?

Kaufman (2012) wrote about some ways in which joyful learning may be encouraged and how teachers may document its presence. One way is to provide all students with an opportunity to experience success. Teachers used phrases such as students "loved the process" and "they got excited every day" to describe lessons that integrated music with language arts content. In these lessons, students were given choices, worked with their peers, and had multiple opportunities during the process of learning to edit and revise their learning. The effect of student choice in arts participation has also been studied in relation to intrinsic motivation, where a recent study demonstrated a positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and overall art skill ($r = .335, p = .007$) (Chad-Friedman, Lee, Liu, & Watson, 2018).

Lee, a second-grade classroom teacher in an arts integrated school, said about a songwriting lesson that her students were proud of their work and "wanted to be recorded several times until it sounded the way they thought it should" (Foust, 2017). When students make an effort to revise and edit work without teacher prompting, this is a sign that students are, in the words of Kaufman, are "naturally striving" for learning. Lee's students did not mind completing more work and engaging longer with the content because the work produced joy and contentment.

Teachers also documented their joy in phrases such as "I loved the experience" and "I was delighted" about witnessing students learn through the arts. One of the indicators of a joyful classroom is when students have opportunities to present their work (Wolk, 2008). In each classroom where student and teacher joy were documented, students exhibited their work through in-class demonstrations, displays of work in the school hallways, or for parents and community members at school events.

The Arts and Social Emotional Learning

While the arts have been shown to increase positivity in the classroom, demonstrate higher retention of content, and increase intrinsic motivation, a recent focus group conducted in a high school in the western region of the United States, relayed important student commentary that documented the impact of the arts on well-being and social-emotional outcomes:

I think when I think of arts it is a way to de-stress because the school like here is very stressful especially the community we come from. We have to work twice as hard, too. It is hard to say to people to get a different look at us. Everyone thinks that we are not talented, that we are not going to do good, but

we show them, most people, that we could do something with our lives. That we could be artistic, we could be creative, we could express things that nobody has like ever reached out and it means a lot especially for people from our community.

Student response to being involved in arts classes in different genres:

[participating in multiple arts classes is]...a very big, like, confidence boost when it comes to, well obviously, knowing that their talents are being appreciated and that they are improving them I feel like they, and a lot of people that I know, feel very confident within themselves and they can actually express how good they are at what they do and it is really nice to see when a lot of the things around the neighborhood and people in this area are very like could be possibly negative or very sad, it can feel any type of way mostly feeling down.

While these student responses shed light on student struggles with creative identity that stem from living and growing up in difficult circumstances, critical conversations are also taking place at the school district level where administrators are actively searching for data-driven methods to change school culture, and decrease student isolation, while strengthening students' sense of belonging (Chand O'Neal, Tadki, & Braman, 2023).

How the Arts Address Students in Emotional Crisis

Recent events in our nation's history require our immediate attention: shootings over the past several years. A recent survey revealed that 57% of our nation's public elementary and secondary students are worried that a school shooting could happen in their school (Kuhfeld, Soland, Lewis, et al, 2022; Noam, 2018).

Throughout the United States, students are at a moment of emotional and academic crisis. These feelings of anxiety impact students in multiple ways, including learning and memory retrieval and social-emotional learning. In terms of learning and memory, Vogel & Schwabe (2016) demonstrate that stress may hamper the updating of memories and induce a shift from a flexible, cognitive form of learning towards rather rigid, habit-like behavior. In response to this student crisis and the resulting achievement gaps, Dr. Francisco Escobedo, former Superintendent of the Chula Vista Elementary School District, drew an important connection between the importance of the impact of the arts and emotional outcomes of our nation's students by stating, "The arts are a matter of front-end public safety. When our kids feel like they belong, they won't hurt each other." Evidence that echoes this construct of belonging indicated that of students who took arts classes in high school (from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health sample of 20,745 students), 51% of this sample reported significantly higher levels of school attachment (Elpus, 2013). Highlighting the importance of these findings, several programs and studies are emerging to address this pressing need, including Partnerships in Education and Resilience, a collaboration between the Harvard Graduate School of Education and McClean Hospital focusing on prevention and resilience. In addition, recent empirical

investigations have examined the impact of the arts on immigrant communities largely impacted by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the impact of the arts on students who have been touched by the federal prison system, who demonstrated gains in interest and engagement in school (Chand O'Neal, 2018; Chand O'Neal, Holochwost & Smyth, 2018).

Our teachers are often the first to notice whether a student is interested in school or engaged in their schoolwork. In a study examining the impact of arts integrated instruction on teacher assessments of student creativity and engagement, results demonstrated that in an examination of the constructs of Emotional Engagement, Interest, Effort, Affiliation and Flow, and the global score of Overall Student Engagement, teachers in arts integrated schools reported a greater increase in their students' positive feelings toward school, interest in assignments and projects, the amount of effort applied to their school work, sense of belonging to their classroom, and absorption in material to the extent that the students lose track of time, over the period of the study compared to teachers in the matched control schools (Chand O'Neal, Schulz Begle & Runco, 2014). In addition, student scores on Flexibility in problem solving revealed that students who received arts integrated instruction had significantly higher flexibility scores ($d = .114$, $F = 6.73$, $p = .010$) than their peers in non-arts integrated schools, emphasizing that the arts do change student perspectives that pertain to creativity, specifically with focus on skills that enable students to apply solutions to problems in multiple domains (Chand O'Neal, Schulz Begle, & Runco, 2015c).

In conclusion, the arts have emerged as a mechanism that brings together cognitive skills of problem solving, idea generation, flexibility, and joyful learning at a time of great need. Our schools can only benefit by relying on the unique skill sets that the arts engender in our student populations. Artists are nimble in their thinking; solve problems in unconventional ways; and are often fearless to try something new in the face of a challenge. The current period in our nation's history requires an urgent response to remind our students that they are resilient, adaptable agents of change and that their actions can make a difference. As educators, it is important to remind our students that to effect change, we need to think like an artist.

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