

The Impact of Integrating the Arts into Content Areas on the Achievement of Students with  
Disabilities

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Traditional instructional methods are not always effectively meeting the unique learning needs of students with disabilities. Drawing on the arts is one possible beneficial avenue for these students to engage and develop content area understanding. In my exploratory qualitative case study, four educators and seven fifth- and sixth-grade students were interviewed to understand their interactions of teaching and learning content area standards through the arts. Work samples were collected from two different arts-infused units, one in math and one in social studies. In order to gather perspectives on their interactions with the arts, student voice was heavily relied on. The overall finding was that integrating the arts into content lessons is a promising strategy for students with disabilities to have equal learning opportunities.

*Keywords:* arts integration, special education, student voice, content area understanding, students with disabilities

Alain de Botton and John Armstrong (2013) state “art holds out the promise of inner wholeness” (p. 34). For many, interacting with the visual and performing arts supports their learning to effectively communicate knowledge to others. Providing multiple avenues to reach understanding, the arts fills holes where understanding has not been developed before. Engaging with the arts is a promising opportunity for learning that can provide learners with unique insights and understanding. When students are provided the freedom to express themselves using the arts, this can contribute to developing a sense of “wholeness” and a feeling of academic competency.

The arts not only deepen understanding but also provide opportunities for students to enhance learning and display knowledge in various ways through arts assessments (Rabkin & Redmond, 2004). Current researchers show that the arts are beneficial in closing the achievement gap and enhancing social experiences (Mason et al., 2008; Rinne et al., 2011; Lorimer, 2011). Academic achievement is seen in art-infused projects, and students develop self-efficacy, increased motivation, and better attitudes toward learning at the end of an integrated curriculum unit as opposed to at the beginning (Moorefield-Lang, 2010; Trent & Riley, 2009). The purpose of my study was to examine the impact of arts-infused curricula, specifically how students with disabilities within the general education curriculum interact with the arts-integrated learning experiences that are part of this curriculum.

### CASE STUDY

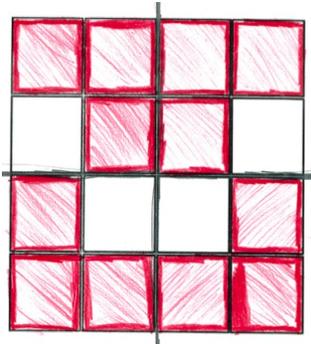
I used the information from the students and teachers, along with my assessment of their work samples, to answer the research question, “How do students with disabilities within the general education curriculum and their teachers perceive the impact of an arts-integrated curriculum on academic achievement?” There were two groups of participants in this study,

seven fifth- and sixth-grade students identified with disabilities and four teachers – two in general education and two in the Exceptional Children department. The students’ disabilities categories include Speech/Language Impairment (SLI), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), and Other Health Impairments (OHI). In fifth grade, the unit was based on the visual art connection between Piet Mondrian’s optimal art and fractions. The teacher described the assignment of students developing their own art piece and defending a fractional piece of their choosing as “self-scaffolded” where students can challenge themselves to their level of understanding. In sixth grade, the students researched ancient civilizations and specifically the art of those civilizations, and then students created an Egyptian-themed visual timeline of their ancient leader’s life for the unit assessment. A significant piece to this case study is the unique setting of a school whose prime focus is delivering arts-infused content area curricula, which can be viewed as a limitation in the scope of these findings.

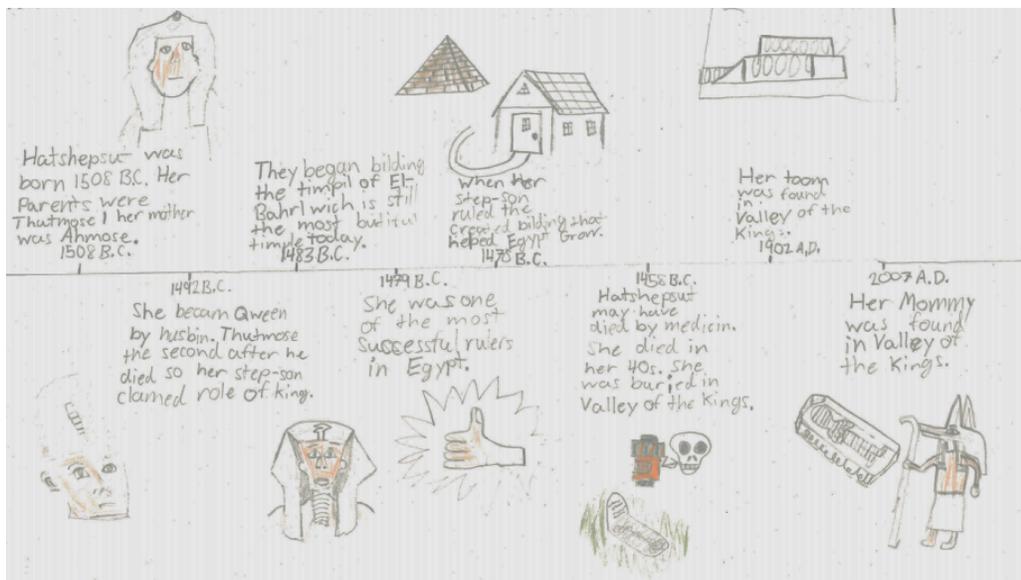
## FINDINGS

Overall, students and teachers reported positive effects on learning through the arts. The first theme corroborated from the findings was “an arts-integrated curriculum provides students with disabilities the opportunity to demonstrate understanding of grade level content area standards.” One fifth-grade student described her learning experience as “knowing that I can at least do it like by myself and at least kind of getting the right answer.” As evidenced in the teacher rubrics, all fifth- and sixth-grade students passed a basic understanding of the content area standards. Some student participants excelled beyond the basic understanding to meet “above expectations” level on the assignments. Images 1 and 2 show student work samples that indicate student understanding. The sixth-grade teacher mentioned numerous times that the arts assignments needed to be scaffolded to prevent frustration, but when students were given a series

of activities to help scaffold their learning, the arts give “students a chance [to] express their learning in a way that they might be more successful in expressing.”



*Image 1.* This fifth grader explained that she broke the sixteen squares into four equal groups as shown from the pencil lines in a cross shape. She colored three out of the four squares in every group.



*Image 2.* This sixth grader’s detailed timeline is in chronological order based on the researched events for his assigned pharaoh. The student explained that he spent an extensive amount of time on his drawings to make them authentic to Egyptian style.

Another theme discovered was “an arts-integrated curriculum impacts students with disabilities’ confidence to understand grade level content area standards.” Demonstrating the empowerment of the arts, one fifth-grade participant stated, “We can find the answer by art.”

From the beginning to the end of the units I studied, teachers observed students' confidence grow in the content area topic. The sixth-grade teacher stated, "I've seen students [with disabilities] who feel super successful... and more confident, more excited about the arts-integrated assessment than the traditional [assessment]." Not only did the teachers recognize the confidence increase, but the students appraised their own work with confidence in their learning. As seen in image 3, each sixth-grade student completed a self-reflection rubric assessing content area understanding and artistic relevance, where all participants graded each category as "I've got this for sure!" The arts empower students with disabilities which can strengthen their confidence to learn. Describing the outcomes of an arts-enhanced lesson, the sixth-grade teacher said, "You can have students who might not otherwise feel successful, feel successful." Within her student context, this teacher saw one student go "full force" into the assignment and "put in a huge effort to make sure that she was getting all of the aspects of the assignment." In her interview, the student stated, "I'm really, really happy and fascinated and inspired to learn more."

This portion of the form should be completed by the student before turning in their project:

Level 3: "I've got this for sure!"  
 Level 2: "I think I've done what I need to do."  
 Level 1: "I'm really unsure about my efforts."  
 Level 0: "I didn't really try to do my best at all."

I filled out my research form completely with relevant facts:  
 0      1      2      3

I paired each illustration with a caption and they are presented in chronological order:  
 0      1      2      3

I took my time to create a neat art piece in the style of the ancient Egyptians:  
 0      1      2      3

I completed every step of the project and my timeline shows the role that my key historical figures had in transforming society:  
 0      1      2      3

*Image 3.* The sixth-grade student reflection rubric demonstrates the student's confidence in his work.

The third theme states “an arts-integrated curriculum affords students with disabilities the opportunity to experience learning content area standards differently.” As one fifth-grade student explained, “It [art] gives me another way to look at things instead of just looking at one way.” Scholars who write about arts integration, and educators who use the arts to teach content area standards, often reference Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences in their support of this approach. The teachers in this study also connect Gardner’s theory as a benefit of arts integration with one teacher stating that the arts “give students multiple means of grasping content or expressing content” with “more opportunities to learn... the material and more varied ways.” A fifth-grade student stated, “I think that art helps me learn by the way of that it’s not just normally learning, instead of it’s more different and more understanding to me than just saying this, you actually put art into it.” A sixth-grade student reiterated that the arts assist in her demonstrating her understanding by saying that “it [the arts] helps like show what you’re doing. If you like don’t write words, you can just show by the picture.” Because oftentimes the arts help students with disabilities learn content area differently, students show increased engagement and focus during learning opportunities; they tend to illustrate these differently than in traditional lessons.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, students with disabilities perceived the two arts-integrated units that were studied to be a successful and exciting way for them to learn and to demonstrate their understanding. Students indicated how the curriculum encourages independent learning; one fifth-grader stated, “Knowing that I can at least do it, like, by myself and at least kind of getting the right answer.” The arts assignments provided open-endedness for the students to make choices that were fitting for their level of learning. In post-interviews, fifth-grade students

recollected the significance of the arts assignments in clarifying previous misconceptions of the fraction standards. In sixth grade, students confirmed that the visual timeline influenced their high achievement on this assignment. With the open-ended nature of the arts assignments, students felt confident that the arts could help them to be successful on the assignments and learn the required materials.

The teachers thoroughly examined students' learning from the beginning to the end of the arts-integrated units. Teachers anticipated that the arts curriculum would have a positive impact on student learning. This predisposition is not surprising, as the teachers have spent many years teaching at a school where the mission is to integrate the arts into content area teaching. After teaching the units, the teachers' convictions were confirmed that the students could represent their understanding of learning standards through a successful chosen method. Normally, these students would be unlikely to easily grasp such content area concepts through traditional teaching methods, but as shown through the rubrics, the students demonstrated grade level proficiency through the arts-integrated activities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study suggest that educators attempt to reach learning goals through multiple avenues and experiment with different approaches to teaching and assessing content understanding. The arts have the capacity to be an open-ended avenue towards learning success because of the opportunities for the use of multiple intelligences. Educators must remember that reaching the learning goal is more important than the avenue taken to obtain the goal. A suggestion for instructional practice is to authentically integrate the arts into content area standards. Table 1 provides a list of a number of good resources to assist educators in beginning their endeavor to implement arts integration. By planning an arts-integrated lesson where the

arts and the content area mutually reinforce one another, teachers give students multiple avenues to learn and express their understanding. Not only can the arts help students make sense of content area standards, but the arts can also be used for assessment. The arts can benefit students by providing them the opportunity to demonstrate understanding of content area. The natural tendency for children to enjoy interacting with the arts and to prefer the freedom of choice are both positive effects of using the arts.

Table 1: *Suggested Arts-integration Resources*

| Resource Name                | Link  | Description   |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| Kennedy Center ARTSEEDGE     | <a href="http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/lessons">http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/lessons</a>                   | Free lesson plans which can be searched by grade level and subject area   |
| Americans for the Arts       | <a href="https://www.americansforthearts.org">https://www.americansforthearts.org</a>   | Resources on advocacy for Arts education  |
| The Wallace Foundation       | <a href="https://www.wallacefoundation.org/pages/default.aspx">https://www.wallacefoundation.org/pages/default.aspx</a>                   | Foundation dedicated to bringing the arts to disadvantaged children.  |
| Read Write Think             | <a href="http://www.readwritethink.org/">http://www.readwritethink.org/</a>   | Literacy lessons powered through the International Literacy Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. Arts and literacy- and art-integrated lessons can be searched and used for free. |
| United Arts Council          | <a href="https://www.unitedarts.org/arts-integrated-lesson-plans/index">https://www.unitedarts.org/arts-integrated-lesson-plans/index</a> | Free elementary grade level lessons from teachers around Wake County, NC  |
| A+ Schools of North Carolina | <a href="https://aplus-schools.ncdcr.gov/">https://aplus-schools.ncdcr.gov/</a>   | Search resources for the live binder of materials from lesson plans to an arts-integrated lesson plan template  |

When having students complete arts-integrated assessments, teachers should lessen the focus on aesthetics (whether the assignments look neat and “pretty”), so a clearer picture of student understanding can be evaluated. Students tend to emphasize a project’s aesthetics

instead of the content area standards, but teachers have the power to help redirect students' focus. In arts-integrated assessments, teachers can shift by creating rubrics that primarily assess understanding of the content area standards, instead of aesthetics such as color or creativity. When students with disabilities are interacting with the arts, teachers should take into account modifications that need to be made in accordance with the students' Individualized Education Plans. For example, for students with disabilities required to write their math rationalizations, they could have used a word bank or sentence starters as effective modifications. Allowing students with disabilities to demonstrate their understanding through the arts should be empowering, not frustrating, which can happen if assignments are not modified with their specific learning needs in mind.

#### CONCLUSION

Students with disabilities desire for educators to listen to them about their educational needs. Authentic arts integration is a possible avenue for success for students with disabilities to confidently reach their grade level content area goals. While it may not always lead to the kinds of academic growth for which educators hope, as can be seen in this study, there are lots of positive benefits that come from integrating the arts into classroom learning.

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