UNDERSTANDING HOW ARTS INTEGRATION CONTRIBUTE TO DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS’ SUCCESS: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Research is beginning to show the positive effects of arts integrated learning on disadvantaged student populations. In a recent review of studies evaluating the impact on this population, students classified as economically disadvantaged, English language learner, or a student with a disability seemed to thrive in classrooms where arts integrated learning experiences were occurring. Attempting to explain the power of arts integrated learning for disadvantaged students, I have proposed a new conceptual framework through the lens of Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy and Axel Honneth’s recognition theory. Timing is everything, and now in the United States of America, with the trend towards all students being held accountable to learn the Common Core standards, there is a window of opportunity for arts integration to receive the spotlight. Since arts integration uses the same curriculum design process as the Common Core standards and is a natural partner with the Universal Design for Learning guidelines, it should be considered as an excellent choice for school reform efforts in schools who have high percentages of disadvantaged students and are struggling to meet Annual Yearly Progress goals.

Keywords: Arts integration, Theoretical framework, Disadvantaged students, Common core standards, Self-efficacy.

Introduction

Arts Integration can best be understood, due to the lack of consensus of any one definition, as defined by three categories: arts integration as learning through and with the arts; arts integration as a curricular connection process; and arts integration as a collaborative engagement (Burnaford, 2007). Hence, to further synthesize the three categories, it can be understood as a curricular connection process that collaboratively engages all to promote learning through and with the arts (Robinson, 2011). Bresler (1995) proposed four styles of integrating the arts into the classroom setting: the subservient integration approach, the co-equal cognitive integration approach, the affective integration approach, and the social integration approach. Educators who use the arts as an extra for their curriculum (a quick arts activity as a filler for a particular content area) are utilizing the subservient approach. In the affective approach, students are immersed in the arts through background music, reactions to music and art pieces, and the arts as self-expression and the arts are used as a complement to the curriculum. The social integration approach is performance based and is used to increase parental participation through school plays and other performances.

When the arts are integrated with other aspects of the curriculum and students are required to use higher order thinking skills and aesthetic qualities to gain further understandings of a particular academic
concept, teachers are utilizing the co-equal cognitive integration approach (Gullatt, 2008). The co-equal cognitive arts integration approach seamlessly merges art standards with core curricula to build connections, provide engaging context, and differentiate both the processes and products of learning. Using the arts integration co-equal cognitive approach is an excellent strategy for planning and teaching the Common Core standards as both utilize Wiggins and McTyhe (2011) Understanding by Design to create interdisciplinary units which focus on the enduring ideas (big ideas) and essential questions to integrate identified content and skills and create deeper learning experiences for students. In addition to providing multiple means of assessment, arts integration also creates opportunities for students to use 21st century learning skills to achieve common core standards.

Furthermore, Universal Design for Learning guidelines are being embraced by New York City and many other school districts to successfully support all students, including students with disabilities, to engage successfully in Common Core aligned tasks. The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) discusses UDL in terms of providing multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of action and expression (2009). Arts Integration and UDL are natural partners. Arts integration is naturally engaging as students have many opportunities for individual choice, autonomy, and self-regulation through collaborative learning experiences with peers. Teachers using the arts in their many forms, (dance, drama, music, visual arts, literary arts, and media arts), offer alternative means for representing information. Through arts integrated learning, all learners are engaged in the creative process which offers a universal pathway to learning. Students 1) imagine, examine, and perceive; 2) explore, experiment, and develop craft; 3) create; 4) reflect, assess, and revise, and 5) share their products with others. Finally, arts integration involves students in ongoing reflection and self-assessment individually, with their peers, and with their teacher (ARTSEDGE, 2012).

Much research has been conducted on the impact of arts involvement or arts study and student success; however, few studies examine the effects of arts integration on student success. Even with the research that shows relationships between student academic gains and arts involvement, there is still a dearth of school leaders who are embracing arts integration in the United States. In Japan, the Netherlands, and Hungary there is a strong curricular emphasis in the arts and these countries have been ranked at the top of an international list of seventeen countries for scientific achievement (Kelstrom, 1998). In China and Germany, educational leaders require arts programs to be offered to all children, while in the U.S. the arts are not widely offered to students (Perrin, 1994). With the recent emphasis on all students mastering the Common Core standards and the natural connections with arts integration and UDL, educational leaders in the U.S. should see this as the perfect time to explore the impact of arts integration on student success especially for disadvantaged populations.

In a recent study, I was interested in examining the quality of arts integration research in order to determine the quantity and quality of studies needed to evaluate if arts integration can be classified as an evidence-based practice. Additionally, I was only interested in studies that examined the effects of arts integration on the success of disadvantaged students. In this study, disadvantaged students was defined as students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students and English-language learners. Since there is an overrepresentation of economically disadvantaged students and/or English language learners who are classified as having a disability (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999) due to the greater ethnic and linguistic diversity because of overrepresentation of some minority groups receiving special education services (Donovan & Cross, 2002), disadvantaged learner was operationally defined to include all three classifications of students.

This evaluation of research studies reviewed studies published between 1995 to 2011 on the impact that arts integration has on disadvantaged students’ success. The CEC Coding Rubrics and the CEC Evidence Based Practice Rubric was used to evaluate design quality, implementation quality, and outcome effects of forty-four studies. Positive effects were reported for drama integration and multi-arts integration. Potentially positive effects were reported for dance integration, visual arts integration, arts integration for students with disabilities, and arts integration to improve school environment.
New Theoretical Framework to Explain How Arts Integration Impacts Students

One way to interpret the findings is by the conceptual framework proposed by Durham (2010). She proposes that students engaged in arts-integrated instruction develop metacognition which bi-directionally influences cognitive processing skills, content knowledge, perseverance, and self-efficacy. This conceptual framework can be viewed through the lens of Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory which claims that learning is interactional within and across the domains of thinking and knowledge and is influenced by personal, environmental, and behavioral variables.

Another way to interpret the findings and understand the power of arts integration on disadvantage student success, is through the lens of both Bandura’s (2001) social cognitive theory and perceived self-efficacy and Honneth’s theory of recognition (2002). I propose this new theory as a conceptual framework which could explain why implementing the Universal Design for Learning guidelines through arts integration may help us to bridge the gap for disadvantaged learners.

Axel Honneth claimed that formation of a personal identity, which is needed for human self-realization, is dependent on three dimensions of recognition: love and friendship, rights, and solidarity. These forms of recognition are obtained from primary relationships, legal relations, and communities of value and provide emotional support, cognitive respect, and social esteem respectively. Without recognition from primary relationships (love and friendship), an individual will not develop self-confidence. Without recognition from legal relations (rights), a person will not develop self-respect. Finally, without recognition from valued communities (solidarity), a person will not develop self-esteem. Solidarity develops from the symmetrical social esteem between autonomous and individualized persons sharing a common horizon of values. Everyone is recognized not only as legally autonomous, but as contributing in a positive way to the community which allows each person to actually experience himself/herself valuable from the perspective of the whole community (Heidegren, 2002).

Experiences in arts integrated learning seem to provide all three forms of recognition which could create environments that facilitate high self-efficacy in students. Several studies reviewed in this study reported gains in student self-efficacy and self-esteem (Jacobs, 2005; Lorimer, 2011; Basset, 2010; Prager, 2006; Ponder & Kissenger, 2009; Smith & McKnight, 2009; Durham, 2010). Zimmerman (2000) reported that self-efficacy beliefs have been found to be sensitive to subtle changes in students’ performance context. Self-efficacy beliefs regulate human functioning through cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes (Bandura, 1990). Students who have a stronger belief in their capability to perform a specific task successfully (self-efficacy), would demonstrate more self-regulation behaviors such as goal setting, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and the use of learning strategies. Because students are being provided multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement, they demonstrate these behaviors in an arts integrated learning experience and naturally receive recognition (emotional support, cognitive respect, and social esteem) within their community of value because they are contributing in a positive way. They would experience feeling valuable from the perspective of their peers which could increase their academic motivation as they feel less stressed, anxious, and depressed. Hence, they select more challenging activities and work with increased effort and persistence. This increase effort and persistence could result in increased academic achievement. (Appendix A).

Eisner (1998) claimed that there was a need for a theoretical framework to explain the connection between the cognitive skills developed in the arts and the functions these skills perform in academic work. This proposed conceptual framework could explain this relationship. Furthermore, it explains why arts integrated learning experiences are a natural partner with Universal Design for Learning and can create learning environments where all students can achieve in classrooms implementing the Common Core standards.
Conclusion

Future research could explore the relationship between arts integrated learning environments, UDL guidelines being implemented, and mastery of the Common Core standards for students with disabilities, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students. Mixed-method studies that could provide thick descriptions of the environments as well as quantifiable subject specific academic achievement data, student and teacher affective outcome data, and class/school environment data may provide a deeper understanding on best practices to narrow the achievement gap for disadvantaged student populations. Finally, research using only quantitative designs will not give us the full understanding of how arts integration is impacting the many unique educational contexts that are being studied and so researchers should use more mixed-method designs to provide the best mix of rich, thick descriptions combined with quantifiable data in order to provide a more complete picture of the effects of arts integration with disadvantaged populations.

As educational leaders, researchers, and politicians, we should take a closer look at evaluating the use of an arts integration co-equal cognitive approach as an excellent strategy for planning and teaching the Common Core standards and creating opportunities for students to use 21st century learning skills in an environment infused with the Universal Design for Learning guidelines. In these environments where all students are provided with multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement, we can begin to bridge the achievement gap as disadvantaged students have opportunities to a high quality education. Timing is everything, and now in the United States of America, with the trend towards all students being held accountable to learn the Common Core standards, there is a window of opportunity for arts integration to receive the spotlight. Since arts integration uses the same curriculum design process as the Common Core standards and is a natural partner with the Universal Design for Learning guidelines, it should be considered as an excellent choice for school reform efforts in schools where there is a high percentages of disadvantaged students who are struggling to meet Annual Yearly Progress goals. All students can learn and understanding the “why” of learning may help us to work together to achieve this!

References


Appendix A

Conceptual Framework
Arts Integration on Disadvantaged Student Success

This increase effort and persistence could result in increased academic achievement.

Increased academic motivation
feel less stressed, anxious, and depressed so select more challenging activities and work with increased effort and persistence.

Increased recognition (emotional support, cognitive respect, and social esteem) within their community of value because they are contributing in a positive way.

Increased self-regulation behaviors (goal setting, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and use of learning strategies)

Arts Integrated learning increases students’ self-efficacy