

The arts across curriculum

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Abstract

We examine the effect of using art to improve the learning of social studies. The study focuses on a group of 4th graders, Hispanic, not English proficient, lacking in interest in social studies. The instruments used are: *A Parent-Teacher Interview*, the *Student's Writing/Social Studies/Arts Survey*, an *open-ended survey*, and the collected data from the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills practice test. We find that incorporating arts in content areas provides opportunities for students to succeed in school, develop their self-esteem, and increase the students' interest for the arts.

Keywords: Arts integration, curriculum, at risk students, social studies, writing, benefits, self-esteem, and love for themselves.

Introduction

Arts integration across the curriculum is an essential part of learning for all students. Arts integration is an approach to teaching and learning through which content standards can be taught and assessed equitably in and through the arts, and it involves learning math, reading, language, science, social studies through use of art forms such as theater, dance, music, visual arts (Baker, 2013). "Americans for the Arts", a leading organization for advancing the arts and arts education, affirms that young people who participate regularly in the arts are four times more likely to be recognized for academic achievement, to participate in a math or science fair, or win an award for an essay or poem than children who do not participate (Segaren, 2019). Similar finding have been reported by The Partnerships for Arts Integration

Research (Burnaford, 2010), and other researchers (Erika Cravath 2011). However, in spite of all the information regarding the benefits of integrating the arts across the curriculum, there are

still sceptics who disagree (Segaren, 2019). It is in this spirit that this project studied the current situation of a group of fourth graders in El Paso, Texas, designed an implemented a plan to integrate arts in social sciences, and measured and analyzed results to quantify the effectiveness of use of the arts across the curriculum.

The present research was performed in an elementary school in El Paso, Texas, on the border between the United States and Mexico, next to Ciudad Juárez, in one of the largest bi-national metropolitan areas in the world. Due to historical reasons, most of the students are of Mexican ancestry, speak Spanish, and suffer from a variety of problems ranging from having to confront a new language, new customs, new culture, discrimination, poverty, low-self-esteem and low academic achievement. Such problems have been well documented, see e.g. Romo (2006), Chavez (2006), and Suraco (2006).

Hispanics throughout the United States suffer of similar conditions. Information from the US Census Bureau shows growths of the Hispanic population from 9% in 1990, up to 12,5% in 2000, and reaching 17.1% today; the Hispanic population reached 62.1 million in 2020 increasing 23% over the previous decade, much faster than the nation's 7% overall population growth. Furthermore, this growth has resulted in the continued geographic spread of Hispanics throughout the United States.

This imprints a sense of urgency to the education of Hispanics. The National Standards stated that "United States must educate students who are quipped linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad". Indeed, it is the duty of foreign-language educators in the 21st century to prepare students to enter the global community as engaged citizens and to implement a curriculum that will promote active and responsible citizenship (Wendy Caldwell, 2007).

In this article we present some background on the use of arts in social studies, describe the conditions of the group under investigation, present the goals of the study, methodology and instruments used to integrate arts in the curriculum, and research findings.

Antecedents: Art and Social Studies

Since early civilizations, people have produced works of art from a variety of perspectives in a wide diversity of mediums, resulting in artifacts that have enriched the human experiences (Morris-Kay, 2010). Art, in its many forms, is practiced by all human cultures and can be regarded as one of the defining characteristics of the human species (2010). In all societies, we can find arts like visual arts, music and dance that are linked with and language, poetry, and storytelling (Morris-K, 2010).

Since 1920's, the art curriculum programs gradually became an essential part of learning because integration provides more meaningful experiences than through separate study of the subjects; effectively art stopped functioning as a unique subject matter and became integrated in curriculum (Freyberger, 1985). In the early 1920's the connection of art in the elementary curriculum was done with history and geography and, in the late 1930's and 1940's, it was integrated in all core curriculum. The areas most requested by teachers were history, geography, science, mathematics, language arts, home economics, and industrial arts (Freyberger 1985, p. 2). Furthermore, by 1960, the value of integration was a motivational factor in art expression and by 1980, Art educators reestablished the programs based upon curricula that focused on the children's needs in the context of the community (Freyberger, 1985, p. 3).

According to *Edutopia*, George Lucas Educational Foundation (2020), the arts command our neural circuitry for a broad range of activities, boosting crucial cognitive and social skills, like spoken and written language, focus, self-control, and empathy." Cognitive psychologists, such as Bruner, Goodnow and Austin, favored the idea that integration makes lessons more

pertinent and learners are more motivated to learn and participate (Amdur, 1993). In spite of this, New Jersey is the only one state in the nation that provides universal access for all public-school students in this 21st century (New Jersey Arts Education Annual Summary Report, 2019), while schools around the U.S. are still not interested in programs where the arts are integrated into the core curriculum.

Local background: Description of the Problem

One big issue of the present study is the lack of awareness in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez metroplex about the relevance of integrating the Arts into the school's core curriculum. In neither of the cities exist a specialized professional arts school where young generations of artists could be prepared. Likewise, there isn't a permanent and local theater activity throughout El Paso and Juarez that it is constantly being renewed with professional casts and local talented young people. In the same manner, there are not enough art galleries where visual artists could present their artwork by free, nor theaters available for local artists, musicians and dancers. The students who graduate from any type of arts' careers from The University of Texas at El Paso fly away to Los Angeles or New York to find job opportunities. Besides that, there exists minimal support from the governmental institutions and the cultural organizations to local artists. Consequently, local young generations do not consider relevant the integration of the arts in the school curriculum.

The school where this study took place is in a poor area of El Paso, Texas, with a Hispanic population, not proficient in English, from low-income families and school dropouts' parents not involved in their children's education. The group under study had been segregated from the rest of the fourth-grade classrooms due to their bad history of misbehavior and academic problems; they were referred to as "the burros", "losers", "problematic kids," or "resource children".

The effect of these labels was a lack of motivation and interest for school. It is known that the lack of encouragement from the teachers results in the students becoming more alienated from the school and the classroom (Reynolds, 2007). It was clear that the students

needed someone who wanted to listen to what they had to say, persons who could care for them and in whom they could trust. Someone who could help them deal with their lives.

To remedy the situation, we paid attention to “The Scripp’s report” which reveals that the low performing’s students who were engaged in arts integrated curriculum, increased their performance consistently each school year (Scripp, 2012), and decided to use an Arts integrated approach to address the behavioral and academic issues of thirteen bilingual fourth-graders.

Instruments used

The participants were thirteen Hispanic fourth graders. Six girls and seven boys. None of them were proficient in English. Diagnosed by the school as at-risk students, due to their academic and behavioral difficulties at school.

The initial situation was qualified using the following sources:

1. *Parent-Teacher Interview:*

The data obtained out of this interview includes: Patterns between the children’s exposure to English (their secondary language, L2) learning at home and their poor performance in language arts. The impact of the parents’ proficiency in L2 with the parental involvement and parental support on students. The family’s lack of exposure to the arts, and their attitude towards integrating the arts into the school curriculum. **Note:** This interview was done at the beginning of the year.

2. *Student’s Writing, Social Studies and Arts survey:*

- The students’ feelings about themselves as writers
- How writing was viewed in each child's life
- Where do students’ preferred to write
- Children’s feelings about including arts into writing activities
- Children’s feelings about learning social studies
- Children’s communicating his/her ideas to improve social studies.
- Students culturally related to any of the stories from Social Studies book.

- Student’s feelings about acting, dancing, and painting
- Children’s experience seeing a theater, music, or dance performance
- Did you enjoy it? What was it about?
- Children’s preference from the visual arts, dance, theater, or music.
- Children’s accuracy to an artistic presentation

3. *Parent’s Writing and Social Studies survey,*

Parents were given a ten question survey, during the month of September to help understand what type of writing experiences each child had at home. The questions helped to determine the level of understanding the parents had regarding writing and social studies, and if the parents themselves needed additional information on the writing process or social studies assignments. “Research shows that if the teacher, parent, and child work and communicate together they can benefit the child's motivation and writing capabilities” (Koulourianos and Marienau, 2001).

4. *TEKS Practice Test,*

The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) is a mandatory exam to measure the state standards for what students should know and be able to do in each subject and grade level. The information used to evaluate the students’ performance was obtained after having an instruction where arts were integrated into core curriculum. The students took the *TEKS Test* at the end of the school year to corroborate that the method of Arts Integrated into curriculum helped students improve academically and pass the test.

5. *Observations,*

All the significant information about each of the students’ academic improvement and social development was recorded along the school-year.

Methodology: Integrating arts in the curriculum

To integrate arts into the core curriculum, we faced the problem of how to engage students in writing and social studies activities; every time the students had to write in either language (English or Spanish) or read a lesson from the social studies textbook, they found the

texts very intimidating, especially for those struggling readers, or the English language learners. Such problem was dodged by using art is a universal language; every child can read a piece of art, can express an opinion. In playing with art every child is successful” (*Edutopia*, 2019).

Another crucial action was the development of bonds of trust and respect among the students, their parents and teachers. Knowing that creating a classroom community where the students respect one another and work together to solve common problems, promotes students’ academic development easier (Jessica Wingell 1999), we decided to use the strategies to promote good discipline in the classroom from the Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association (MTEA) that encourages teachers to be fair, positive and consistent, provide a list of standards and consequences to parents and students, keep rules simple, get to know your students, let them know you care, praise good work, avoid threats, sarcasm and arguments, give reasonable assignments, and the like.

To integrate the curriculum we followed the recommendations of Elizabeth T. Hinde (2005) and of the organization “Americans for the Arts”, and implemented the Five Art Models of Julia Marshall (2010), namely: Depiction, extension/projection, reformatting strategy, mimicry strategy, and Metaphor. A brief example is the activity where students get to picture their family as a solar system.

Drama was integrated as exemplified in “79 Reasons Kids to Study Drama at High School” (Pepper, 2012), which encourages students to question and explore new ideas and ways of living and thinking.

Likewise, the visual arts were integrated within civics, English, history, and geography curricula, as explained by Schubert and Melnick (1997). The impact of visual arts in writing was studied qualitatively and based on existing data that supports our research questions, and the open-ended, semi-structured, informal interviews (Lok 2014, p. 14).

Another important literature review was to decorate the classroom with students’ classwork. Students worked on activities related to their cultural heritage like writing “calaveras” for the Mexican celebration of “Día de los muertos”, or making a comic-strip book to retell their favorite stories, and the elaboration and creation of their first Illustrated story book.

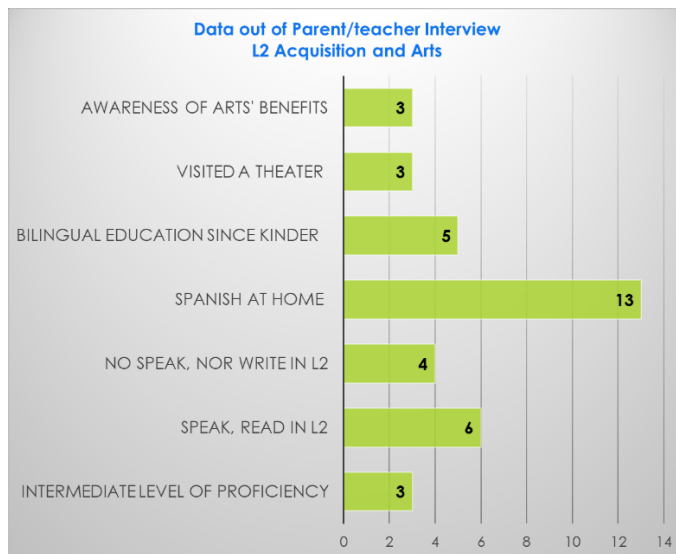
Another related projects was the *Rincón Poético* (The Poetry Corner), name given to a corner with the students' original poetry in Spanish or in English. This activity encouraged children to participate in a local poetry contest organized by El Paso Independent School District, in which the three students from our class were the winners.

Research Findings

Figure 1 shows results from the *Parent-Teacher Interview* includes, the data collected from thirteen parents' interviews, on regards to their family's L2 acquisition background, their children's exposure to L2 learning at home and the parents' exposure to arts.

Figure 1

Parent-Teacher interview



Out of the data from the *Parent/teacher Interview*, the main findings are the following:

- The majority of parents were low proficient in L2 learning. Only three were intermediate L2. Six were able to speak in English, but were not proficient in reading nor writing. The other four parents understood the language and were able to read it, but didn't speak it

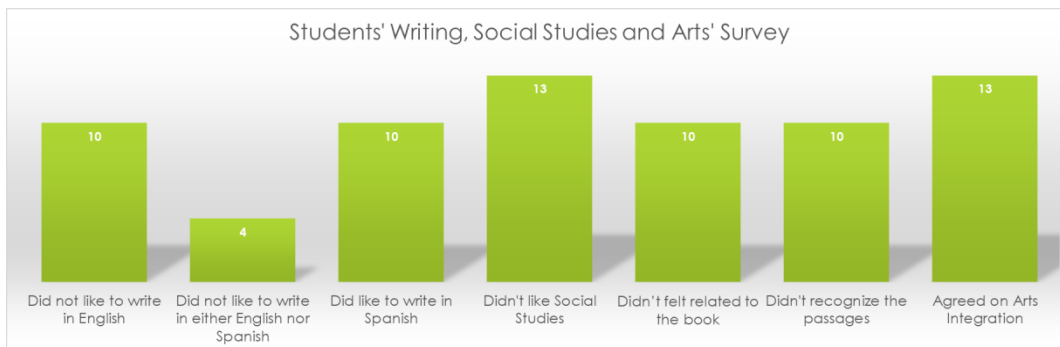
nor write it. Even though, eight parents expressed their desire to help their children with homework, they were not able to do it because they had a low proficiency in L2.

- The thirteen families preferred to watch television, listen to music and speak in their native language at home. The cause pattern was that not being exposed to L2 at home has an effect pattern of students' low performance in writing and language arts. According to Samer Mahmoud Al-Zoubi (2018), there exists "a general consensus among researchers in language acquisition that exposure to language plays an essential role in language acquisition, where learners are able to learn languages easily, and more successfully".
- A logical pattern was found between the number of parents who were of intermediate proficiency in English and those able of help children with their writing homework.
- Overall, there was a main impact on the students' lack proficiency in L2 amongst all the fourth grade classrooms to the development of students' low self-esteem.
- A pattern was found between the parents who had visited a theater to see a dance performance, a musical play or a concert, and the parents who were aware of the benefits of the arts for the students' learning and development.

Figure 2 shows results from the *Student's Writing/ Social studies and Arts survey*.

Figure 2

Student's Writing/ Social studies and Arts survey



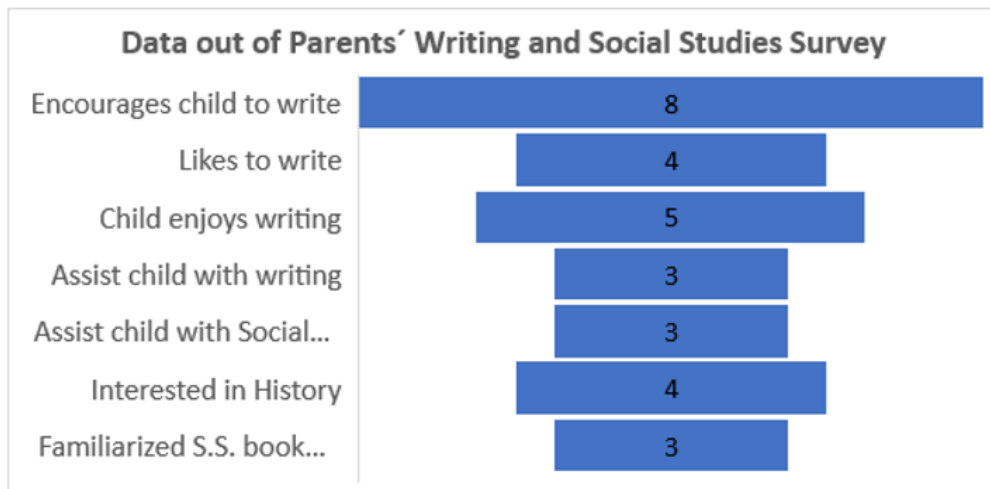
The results from *Student's Writing/ Social studies and Arts survey* are the following:

- Ten students expressed having no interest in writing in English. They did like to write in their native language. A pattern between the parents' low proficiency in L2 and the lack of parental involvement and support on students was identified.
- All students were enthusiastic about learning with arts integrated, but were apathetic towards learning about Social Studies. The students' low proficiency in English was only one of the causes of their lack of interest. Ten children stated they found the social studies book boring and hard to understand. They did not feel related to the content of the Social Studies book and had no previous knowledge about the historical events or book passages.
- Another pattern is that the last three children were the same ones whose parents had an intermediate level of L2.

Figure 3 shows the information from the *Parent's Writing and Social Studies survey*.

Figure 3

Parent's Writing and Social Studies survey



The findings from the *Parent's Writing and Social Studies survey* are the following:

- Eight parents encouraged their children to write, but only four parents were acquainted about children's interest for writing.

- Ten parents stated they did not assist their children with homework. Six answered they did not know how to do it, so they asked a relative to help them.
- Four parents answered they couldn't help because they work late.

This information was useful in the determination of distributing a "Writing's Rubric" to parents and teach them how could they use it to help their children with writing homework.

TAKS Tests. Before the start of the project, at the end of half of the school year, none of the students met the state expectations. Ten students passed all three sections of the TAKS test in Spanish. Two students did not pass the reading portion, but did pass the writing and math sections. One student did not pass the math portion but did pass the other two sections. *TAKS practice test* scores indicated that the students needed to improve their writing, and pointed at the concepts they had to review.

After the integration of the arts activities, the students passed the *TEKS* tests revealing that the students had improved academically. According to the test scores, our group met the state's expectations and did well on their writing exams. This testing information was used to better understand what components of writing the students needed to improve upon. Hence, higher levels of confidence yielded better test scores (Koulourianos and Marienau, 2001).

Further modifications

After observing the students and interviewing parents, a lack of attention and poor emotional support received at home was detected. To investigate further, one of the authors (JA) decided to eat with them every day during lunch time to encourage them to talk about anything they wanted to, with the teacher becoming more of a listener and a friend. The instructor got to know each student and became familiarized with the students' family and their academic background history. Keeping communication with the parents by phone, in person and through the homework booklet daily, the instructor sent home notes reporting on the bad or good performance in class, and complimenting the achievements and good behavior of their children.

Integrating the Arts into their curriculum was another way to promote the communication and caring of the students, this resulted in the creation of conditions that developed children's self-esteem and love for themselves. The teacher interest made the instruction attractive for the students and transformed the formal and rustic educational model into an attractive and fun way of learning into thinking outside of the box with the help of Arts integration into core curriculum.

Integrating the arts into my classroom helped to create a positive environment where the students felt relaxed and happy while they were learning while showing respect for the families and their cultural and linguistic differences. A classroom that strengthen their culture values by placing Mexican arts and crafts around the room and hanging some lithographs of famous painters as Modigliani, Botero, Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and Klimt to let them be in contact with the Arts from the very beginning. As well as music, which was part of the classroom' routines every day.

Music from around the world as well as classical music were played all school year long in class. Students loved to hear music while they worked on math exercises. In the classroom, classical or soft music was used for concentration and dynamic music was played when they were practicing with math equations or centers.

Music and Dance for math learning. A daily routine was instituted that included everyday math activities with dance and music. The rhythms in music are basically patterns, which is an important part of math. Children learned mathematical concepts, such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division with music.

"Journal News" was an English activity that encouraged students to speak in their L2 and allowed the more proficient students to take the role of the teacher and record the classmates' news.

The collected data was helpful to find some indicators of the roots from the students' problems, and found out that all students were struggling with writing and social studies. A three week project that covers complete unit on social studies based on the different Native Americans around U.S. was introduced. First, a portion of the social studies book would be read

to them while showing big posters that portrayed images of the different Native Americans and the way they lived. Then, a unit with information about the music, food, housing, clothing, religion and main characteristics of Native Americans was used. This was followed by activities that involved the participation of all fourth graders integrating all four main streams: music, dance, visual arts and theater.

The procedure divided the students in groups and assigned one Native American tribe to each group. For each group the directions were written on the board, as well as the request information they needed to do their research on. The first assignment initiated with a visit to the computer lab where children had to look for useful and relevant information regarding several aspects that constitutes the way each tribe lived: food, clothing, housing, and way of living. Also, during class time, every time a child finished with his/her classwork they could continue working in their project with the classroom computer. At the same time, the whole group worked during one week on creating a giant tipi that covered the classroom door. Along the whole following weeks, during the classwork time, the students were able to listen to some different types of Native American tribe's music. Then, each team had to decide what to do to make a presentation of their tribe in front of the class. After the presentations they created big drawings and use tempera painting to represent the way of living of each of the Native Americans groups like the artifacts, type of housing, food, and clothing. At the end of this activity, students pasted their final drawing and painting projects outside the classroom. The final project consisted on a dramatization of the way of living of Apaches, one of the most representative tribes of Texas. First, all the students along with the teacher wrote the play. We used the information found on the way of living of Apaches did before. Then, the kids selected the roles they preferred or in which production role they wanted to work on. For these acting roles, students had to do a research on the internet about tribal activities to use them as their guide for their own performances. Some students had the role of narrators who had explain the entire play, and some others were in charge of the lighting and production. Parents were involved also in this project by helping us bringing or making up props of food to use during the presentation. At the end, the play was presented to other fourth grade classrooms and to the parents and staff community from school.

The Native American project was an excellent resource for teaching social studies and writing integrated with music, dance, visual arts and theater. Overall, this activity helped the fourth graders develop their self-esteem as well as it increases their interest for social studies.

Conclusion

Our experience demonstrates that arts learning experiences can play a vital role in developing students' capacities for critical thinking, creativity, imagination and innovation, skills and competencies that all students need as part of a high quality and complete 21st-century education (The National Task Force on the Arts in Education). It is our hope that the strategies and study cases summarized in this work would motivate teachers to introduce art activities into the curriculum. We believe this could save students from dropping out from school in the future, help them develop a sense of community, and eradicate delinquency and violence from the streets.

The program of Arts integrated across curriculum is the best option for teachers to get students think out of the box and become successful in school. Arts allow vulnerable children to develop their self-esteem, and love for themselves. Their creativity and love for learning. It is the teacher's job to create the conditions that will keep students away from a future of violence and delinquency, and to happen. Teaching with love is teaching with arts integrated across core curriculum.

The Masters Thesis on Creative Writing of Jissel Arroyo (2020) lists suggestions on how to integrate arts into curriculum, including dance teaching techniques, ideas for incorporating dance and drama into the curriculum for teaching literacy, math, social studies, science, etc. and contains several lesson plans and the instruments (Parent's interview questions, Student Writing, Social Studies and Arts Survey, and the Parent Writing and Social Studies Survey) used in this study.

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