COMMENTARY

Arts Integration as Key to Student Academic Achievement

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Enrichment programs in K–12 schools, such as the arts, are frequently cut to drive student performance in language arts and mathematics—the focal points of most standardized exams. However, a mounting body of evidence suggests that the arts have positive long-term impacts on college access, academic success, and civic involvement. One way to keep the arts in schools is to integrate them into curricula, but there are few studies on the impact of arts integration and models that could be implemented on a large scale.

One intensive arts education organization, Inner-City Arts (ICA), has a unique partnership model with Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), called Learning and Achieving Through the Arts (LATA). In the LATA model, public school teachers learn a variety of art forms alongside their students. This approach is supported through high-quality professional development targeted at building bridges between these experiences in the arts and other academic areas, particularly literacy and language arts.

The LATA model aims to enhance English language skills and competencies through the arts, especially for traditionally marginalized subpopulations, such as English Language Learners (ELLs). LATA promotes active engagement in the learning process through full-school engagement with arts-centered learning, teacher training, and school-wide activities. Classroom teachers are introduced to new methods that build creative learning environments in the classroom, and collaborate directly with teaching artists to develop arts-integrated lesson plans. Student learning is seen as a shared responsibility of classroom teachers and teaching artists.

For example, one classroom teacher might partner with a teaching artist to create a unique lesson plan that uses animation to explore animals and their natural habitats. In the lesson, the students create still-frame animations that demonstrate hypothetical short stories about what it would mean for a camel to migrate from the desert to a polar climate and the changes/adaptations that would need to occur to adjust to this new climate. The lesson is creative, personalizes the science instruction, and fundamentally changes students' relationship to the concepts (thus making them more relevant and memorable) through hands-on making.

Over the course of a four-year project funded by the U.S Department of Education's Arts Education Model Development and Dissemination (AEMDD) program, my colleagues and I compared three schools using the arts-integrated LATA model against three schools (matched on over 30 different school factors) that used standalone arts instruction. We found that schools using the arts-integrated model had an average 11% gain on standardized tests in number of students proficient in English Language Arts (ELA) compared to an average 1% *loss* of students proficient in those schools without arts-integrated instruction. Even more noteworthy was the gain for ELL students. During the same time period, ELL students had an average 15% gain in the number of students proficient on ELA standardized tests. These gains suggest that arts integration models have potential value for similar student groups for increased achievement in ELA.

There are practical implications here for policymakers, administrators, and investors who are interested in educational reform initiatives. When choosing, planning, supporting, or mandating arts programming for academic impact, *integration matters*. A key ingredient in an integrated model is the earmarking of some funding for professional development opportunities for teachers. We're finding that it's not just about access to the arts, rather the LATA model shows us that transfer between the arts and gains in standard tests is contingent on building bridges across curricula, which can be done via collaborations between arts and non-arts faculty, non-arts teachers working alongside their students in the arts, as well as by carving out professional development time on how to best integrate artistic and creative experiences into any subject matter. Policymakers or other investors intent on enriching school experiences and outcomes for similar student populations should consider how integration, rather than standalone arts programming, can help improve schoolwide academic achievement.

This study suggests guidelines for possible strategic programming design, modification, and expansion, perhaps particularly for large urban district partnerships seeking to address the complex issue of chronically low standardized test scores. Additionally, there may be similarly successful yet distinctly different models of successful arts programming and partnerships in large urban districts that are deserving of further study. While the LATA model is certainly not the only successful model, it holds important clues to a progressive, holistic approach toward academic improvement that can be leveraged elsewhere.

For further detail on both the model and the research, see the full 2014 study (Positive Impact of Arts Integration on Student Academic Achievement in English Language Art in The Educational Forum, Vol. 78, No. 4, pp. 364-377).

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