The various ways my students make sense of their worlds both in and out of school has always fascinated me, but I owe a special debt of gratitude to Natalie, whose incessant doodling ultimately drove me to explore the contribution of art to regular classroom curriculum. While I initially considered her drawings a distraction, I soon realized that they helped her relate to what we were investigating in class. Through her pictures, Natalie showed me that art was her pathway to learning.

No Child Left Behind has forced many American schools to become language-driven and text-oriented, but my experience with Natalie and others like her led me to suspect that students would benefit from opportunities to transform their knowledge from words into other expressive media. Deasy (2003) highlights dozens of studies suggesting the cognitive value of the arts in helping children develop language and literacy skills. In fact, the National Council of Teachers of English Elementary Section Steering Committee (1996) states:

We define the language arts broadly to include all of the various ways that learners make and share meaning... (including) art, music, drama, mathematics, and movement as well as the traditional four of language—reading, writing, speaking and listening (pp. 11-12).

That being the case, it seems imperative to explore all avenues for teaching and learning that may have an impact on literacy, including the arts, in order to truly educate our children.

The Purpose of the Study

This study explored the ways in which music, drama, art, and movement were integrated with classroom content at a public arts-magnet school. While some research exists that correlates the arts with higher test scores, Deasy (2003) suggests a need for arts research to “define with greater depth, richness, and specificity the nature of the arts learning experience itself” (p. iii). With that in mind, I posed the following questions:

1. What do arts-integrated lessons look like and sound like?
2. How is meaning-making supported and/or constrained through integrated arts activities?

My intention was to respond to Deasy’s call for studies “that probe the complexity of the arts learning experience and also takes into account the contexts in which learning occurs” (Deasy, 2003, IV).
Art as a Sign System/Language

Meaning is created, represented, and interpreted through the use of different semiotic, or sign, systems, which learners naturally employ as they make sense of the world.

Looking Closely

Looking Closely

The Arts Academy is an urban, K-5 magnet school located in the southeastern United States. It is a Title I school whose student population consists of approximately 450 children from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. According to the principal, “the arts (act) as a catalyst to improve our students’ achievement, confidence, and communication skills” (personal communication, February 19, 2004). It employs full-time art, music, PE/movement, and drama teachers who not only teach their own disciplines, but also design and teach arts integration lessons. In addition, an artist-in-residence program brings musicians, artists, dancers, and theater groups to the school throughout the year.

According to the visual arts instructor, the goal of arts integration is “to have the learning be better... to help kids learn things that are difficult for them” (personal communication, January 23, 2004). These lessons are designed to accomplish one of three things: (1) to introduce and create enthusiasm for a new unit of study; (2) to reinforce concepts already learned; or (3) to enrich content and add another layer of meaning. Classroom teachers use a planning sheet for each art area to indicate the standards to be addressed. Art teachers then used these plans to develop lessons via their particular discipline, and the integration was team-taught and evaluated with the help of the classroom teacher.

Over a 4-week period, I observed third, fourth, and fifth grade students as they engaged in arts integrations. I talked with them about their work, listened to their conversations, and watched the decisions they made in an attempt to discover how combining the arts with classroom content might support or constrain learning. Interviews were conducted with the principal and all four arts teachers to gather information about the school’s history, and to gain their perspectives on the arts’ impact on student learning. I then examined field notes, student artifacts, and interview transcripts for evidence of the impact of arts integrations on learning. By reviewing and comparing data from several sources, I discovered that some consistencies existed across integrations, regardless of which arts and classroom disciplines were involved.
What Integrations Looked Like and Sounded Like

An undercurrent of excited whispering circulates in the darkened room as students wait for the lesson to begin. They are studying the properties of light, and this lesson will introduce them to the concepts of transparent, translucent, and opaque materials through the work of photorealist painter, Janet Fish. When the projector lights up, students erupt with a chorus of “oooh” and “aahh” as a colorful still life, entitled Raspberries and Goldfish, appears. A bowl of raspberries is flanked by vases of orange and yellow nasturtiums, with a stack of glass plates in the foreground. A round goldfish bowl rests on a turquoise plate beside an open window draped with sheer curtains. “What do you see in this picture?” the teacher asks. “It looks like it’s moving!”

“Beautimous!” The teacher points out ways in which the artist represents transparent, translucent, and opaque materials in her work, assessing students’ understanding by having them reference examples of each in the painting. She then explains their assignment. Using transparent, translucent, and opaque materials, students are to create an aquarium scene, then label each kind of material appropriately. Tubs of brightly colored tissue and origami paper are provided. Students stand, sit, and move around the room to work and get the materials they need. Everyone is engaged and working at his or her own pace. Some students labor over the aquarium outline, while others transform bits of colored paper into seaweed, turtles, and fish (see above). The atmosphere is relaxed and punctuated with snippets of conversation about the artwork. “Is this good?” “Is this too low for the fish bowl?” “Look at the pretty colors!” “You could add an eye or scales to your fish.” The teachers wander around the room offering assistance and encouragement, and when a student complains, “I messed up on my fish,” a classmate hands him the tub of materials so he can begin again.

When the lesson is over, the students respond with a loud and disappointed “Awww!” Their teacher reassures them that “If you don’t finish today, we’ll finish tomorrow,” and asks to keep the materials for her next class.
This vignette highlights the qualities that made arts integrations engaging learning experiences.

1. Integrations allowed students to use their hands, bodies, and voices in meaningful ways.

What we typically 'shush' (voices) or ask to keep still (hands and bodies) become tools for learning in an arts integration lesson. As the fourth graders created their works of art, they were permitted to stand, sit, or move around the room as needed. This sense of freedom and responsibility for their own learning helped sustain their attention and encouraged perseverance with the task.

2. Making art allowed choices about how to interact with content.

Expressing their understanding of concepts through art led students to become more attentive to detail, more deliberate in their choices, and more thoughtful about what they considered essential, underscoring the power of art as an intellectual exercise. Students not only had to think about what items they wanted in their aquarium scenes, they had to include a variety of transparent, translucent, and opaque materials and decide how best to use them.

3. Integrations were social events.

After the lesson was introduced and instructions were given, teacher talk ceased to dominate or control the conversations in the room. Students were free to visit with one another as long as they were working. They borrowed materials and ideas freely from each other, but this social aspect of the integration did not appear to divert anyone from the purpose of the lesson.

These three qualities were apparent in all the integrations I observed. What made some of them superior to others, however, had to do with the way the arts and classroom content complemented each other. For example, one fifth-grade teacher requested a PE integration introducing ecosystems. As the class filed into the gym, the PE teacher distributed six popsicle sticks and the name of an animal living in the Everglades to each child. They stood in a circle as the teacher read a series of scenarios that could affect the animal's ability to survive. If they believed the event described would be harmful to their animal, they placed a stick on the floor. When all six sticks were gone, students sat down and were out of the game. While this activity generated discussion about the effects of human activity on ecosystems, there was little actual movement involved. The teachers agreed that in this case, the integration was weak because PE and science content seemed to work against each other, rather than overlapping or co-occurring (Albers, 2000).

Implications for Learning

This study yields evidence that integrating the arts with classroom content consistently supports all kinds of learners. The only constraints reported by teachers appeared to be primarily time-related.

Supportive Elements of Art Integrations

The current fifth-graders at The Arts Academy, who have studied the arts since kindergarten, were asked to reflect upon their experiences with music, drama, movement/dance, and art. Their responses below help frame what I believe to be the essential supportive elements of learning about, with, and through the arts (Goldberg, 1997).

1) Arts integrations allowed for multiple perspectives: "I learned it is fun to be in someone else's shoes for a while" (personal communications, March 5, 2004). Learning content through the arts was an inclusive experience in these classrooms. No matter what their cognitive bias (Hubbard, 1989) or learning styles/preferences might be, the arts permitted students to interpret content in ways that were meaningful to them. During an integration of art and social studies to review important historical figures, students were urged to draw what would help them remember as they sketched. The focus was not so much on making good art, but on creating meaningful symbols for remembering information. Drawing required students to express their understanding of the facts they had learned in personalized ways.

2) Arts integrations helped create a safe atmosphere for taking risks: "You don't have to make your drawing look real ... it's great as long as you like it" (personal communication, March 5, 2004). When asked how he saw the arts as helping children, the principal observed, "It is the only opportunity for some of those children to attach meaning to what we're doing ... Because they're not understanding the language ... it's hard for them to read a fifth grade content book, their reading level may not be fifth grade content, but they see it, they do it, they act it out, it's
fun, it's engaging, they remember it. They're able to attach meaning to that and build on their experiences" (personal communication, February 19, 2004). During a music/science integration on the water cycle, fourth graders created new lyrics to a familiar jingle. One of the most enthusiastic contributors to the song was a student who attended resource classes. Music helped reduce the risk he associated with written language and allowed him to contribute in ways that embraced his strengths instead of revealing his weaknesses.

3) Arts integrations demonstrated that learning can be a pleasurable experience: "The best thing about the arts is it is creative and fun and that's what keeps me going and staying on track" (personal communication, March 5, 2004). One of the reasons I believe the arts are perceived as "fun" is that they encourage students to explore things in school just the way they would outside of school—with hands, bodies, and voices. One kindergartener new to the school learned this during a drama lesson on expressing feelings. Overwhelmed at first by the movement and noise of his classmates, and thinking this kind of behavior would get him in trouble, he held back. When the teacher encouraged him to participate and he understood that it was all right to laugh out loud or to growl in anger, he remarked, "I'd better take off my glasses ... so they'll be safe!"

4) The arts and regular classroom curriculum naturally complement each other: "The arts can help people for other classes, such as math and science" (personal communication, March 5, 2004). The degree to which the arts teachers weave other subject areas into their instruction was substantial. In a second-grade music lesson, musical composition was connected with writing. The activity involved creating a short melody using three specific pitches, so the music teacher demonstrated by making up her own tune and playing it for the class. Deciding she didn't like the way it sounded, she changed a couple of notes, then played it again. She pointed out that as composers, the students could revise their musical pieces, just as they did as writers.

Constraints of Arts Integrations
Although my time at the school was brief, I saw no evidence that art integrations actually constrained the making of meaningful learning. According to both the arts and regular classroom teachers, the main problem was time. In order to prepare high quality integrations, the arts teachers not only had to know their own discipline-specific standards, but the K-5 standards as well. There was also the matter of deciding how the two disciplines would best complement each other within the integration. As the visual arts teacher noted, "It takes so much time to plan a good integration," (personal communication, March 5, 2004) and her colleagues concurred. Not only are the arts teachers responsible for writing grants that subsidize the arts magnet program and keeping track of the spending, they must also find, hire, and pay the artists-in-residence, run after-school arts clubs, arrange the integration schedules, and rehearse performances. The arts teachers agreed that time was their only constraint with regard to preparing and teaching arts integration lessons.

Conclusion
This study explored the value of weaving the visual and performance arts throughout regular classroom curriculum, and it demonstrates that experiences with the arts are not merely embellishments to the elementary curriculum. Based on my own classroom experience and growing understanding of multiple ways of knowing, I am convinced that weaving the arts throughout the regular classroom curriculum supports learning in several ways.

First of all, when the arts become a vehicle for learning classroom content, the whole child is involved. Children are immersed intellectually, emotionally, physically, and therefore rigorously, in the learning experience. This transaction of external factors with the internal conditions of the learner creates what Dewey (1938) referred to as an educative experience, one that stimulates learning in the present and cultivates a positive mindset for learning in the future.

Next, the arts require children to assume greater responsibility for their own learning. When challenged to demonstrate their learning dramatically, visually, or musically, students must make important decisions about what is essential and what is not. They must make thoughtful, deliberate choices about how to best represent and communicate what they know.

Finally, arts integrations are inclusive experiences that invite all students to participate in the learning process. Students who struggle academically experience success when
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given the opportunity to demonstrate their learning using multiple sign systems, while those who are competent with language expand their repertoire of communication through the challenge of transforming their knowledge from words into pictures, gestures, or sounds. Blending the arts with classroom curriculum helps create Zones of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), in which taking risks in learning is encouraged and supported via social interaction.

Unfortunately, No Child Left Behind requires schools to define curriculum in terms of language, thereby restricting the kinds of opportunities students have to encounter other forms of communication. The focus has shifted from teaching children to teaching curriculum, marginalizing many students in our nation’s increasingly diverse school population. This study reveals the possibility of supporting every child when the arts work in concert with classroom content to enhance the creation and expression of meaning. Although language is often considered synonymous with literacy, we must remember that “other sign systems do things that language does not do, or else they would cease to exist” (Berghoff, et al., 2000, p. 14). Meaningful change in education will only come about through close examination and thoughtful reflection of current classroom practices that are dominated by written language. If public education is truly committed to having no child left behind, it would do well to consider bringing the arts along, too.

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