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Julie E. Findlay
Trinity College

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The Art of Education:
Comparing Classroom Dynamic Influences on the Learning
Process

Julie E. Findlay
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Professor Kathleen Elliott
Trinity College, Hartford CT
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Introduction

Learning and experiencing different forms of arts is important for everyone. Research has shown that there are many benefits of the arts, whether it is because they help to improve achievement in other classes or whether it is because they teach skills and abilities that are valuable to everyday life. However, a survey by the Center on Education Policy found that “since the passage of the federal law [NCLB], 71 percent of the nation’s 15,000 school districts had reduced the hours of instructional time spent on history, music and other subjects to open up more time for reading and math” (Dillon, 2007, p. 1). Why is it then that we know how many benefits there are from art programs, yet the arts continue to be the first program cut from schools? Why are other classes, such as math and reading, taking up more class time while the arts are getting less?

My original research question focused more on the implementation and experience of the Moving Matters! arts movement program in an elementary Hartford school. However, after actively participating in the classroom and interviewing teachers, I realized that there were more significant changes in the dynamics of the classroom as well as the type of learning that occurred. Therefore, I decided to not only look at the experience of the program in general, but also focus more on the ways in which the students’ experience of the arts program differs from the students’ experience in a more traditional classroom.

I proposed this question because I was already involved in the Moving Matters! Program as part of another class at Trinity this semester. The Moving Matters! Program is designed so that each student in the class is paired with a teaching artist and an elementary school classroom. The Trinity students work alongside the teaching artist in helping to teach the students about the arts and movement. The program is set up so that we meet with the classes for at least 10

sessions and work toward a final dance performance in which all ten of the elementary classes perform together. I became interested in the program right from the beginning because of the excitement that I saw in the students. I then decided to base this research project on this arts program, more specifically on how the students responded differently to the classroom dynamics provided in comparison with more traditional classroom dynamics.

Research Question

How does the classroom environment in the arts program compare to a more traditional math class? How do the students respond to the differences?

Literature Review

The debate on art education programs has been increasingly examined since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The No Child Left Behind Act is a standards-based education reform, which requires states to create assessments and test each school to make sure that students are receiving adequate schooling. In the book *Many Children Left Behind* by Meier et al. (2004), they write: “We continue to confuse test scores with quality schooling, even though there is no evidence that high scores on these tests predict anything about a child’s success in life after school” (p. xii). The goal is to make each school accountable for the education the students are receiving through statewide standardized testing. Although this sounds good theoretically, it has also had several negative repercussions within schools. Assessment requirements have lead educators to devalue subjects that are not tested such as music and art. Meier et al (2004) write: “As non-tested areas (art, music, social studies) and ‘frills’ (field trips, naps, even recess) are eliminated, the school experience becomes limited, and everyone – children, parents and communities – reports less satisfaction with the school” (p. xii). These programs tend to be

replaced by test preparation time or more time spent in the tested subjects such as math and reading, because schools must meet state requirements in order to receive federal funding.

As a result of economic constraints and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools are forced to make decisions on where to cut budget costs. It is not surprising that the increased focus on core subjects has resulted in schools deciding to cut art programs. Joseph Van Harken writes: “an unintended consequence is that the art and other classes like music, gym, science and social studies get cut or compromised to make the budget focus more on the core curriculum” (2003). Many teachers and schools are encouraged to do whatever it takes to raise test scores, even if it means cutting out some of the more enjoyable aspects of education.

However, there has also been a great deal of research on the benefits that the arts can provide to students. A report compiled of seven different studies called Champions of Change provides evidence as to how and why the arts enhance learning and achievement for students. After looking over the data, the Champions of Change researchers found that “while learning in other disciplines may often focus on development of a single skill or talent, the arts regularly engage multiple skills and abilities” (1999, p. 12). This helps students develop into well-rounded learners. Additionally, the researchers found that “the arts transform the environment for learning...the very school culture is changed and the conditions for learning are improved. Figurative walls between classrooms and disciplines are broken down” (p. 12). Therefore, a well-taught arts program goes beyond just teaching about the arts and really transforms the learning environment. These researchers also found that the arts might provide a reason for students at risk of dropping out of school to stay in school. This is because the arts can engage students in a way that more traditional classes may not be. Furthermore “success in the arts became a bridge to learning and eventual success in other areas of learning” (Champions of Change, 1999, p. 12).

They found that arts might provide this success for any students, although especially for those who are considered low achieving in other classes. Finally, they found that the arts connect students to each other while helping students to take risks (Champions of Change, 1999, p. 12).

One study by James Catterall, Richard Chapleau and John Iwanaga found three main observations about the arts and academics. First they found that “positive developments for children engaged in the arts are seen at each step in the research” (1999, p. 2). They found that these positive developments also held true for children from low-income families (Catterall, Chapleau & Iwanaga, 1999, p. 2). Secondly, they concluded that “students who report consistent high levels of involvement in instrumental music over the middle and high school years show significantly higher levels of mathematics proficiency by grade 12” (Catterall, Chapleau & Iwanaga, 1999, p. 2). Their final conclusion was that student involvement in theatre arts is associated with better reading abilities, gains in motivation and confidence as well as more tolerance for others (Catterall, Chapleau & Iwanaga, 1999, p. 2). These findings are all important because one of the main reasons for cutting art programs out of schools is to improve performance in core classes, yet this research shows that the arts can help to improve those scores (Van Harken, 2003).

Jerome Kagan (2009) as well as several others (Eisner, 1998, 2001, 2004) argues several reasons as to why the arts are important in elementary education. Kagan (2009) wrote that “the arts boost the self confidence of children who are behind in mastery of reading and arithmetic...children, like adults, are vulnerable to becoming discouraged when they sense that a goal they desire is probably unattainable...one strategy to mute a child’s discouraging evaluation of self competence is to provide the child with opportunities to be successful at some classroom task” (p. 29-30). This boost in confidence can then generalize to other academic domains.

Kagan also argues “the arts and music provide an opportunity to persuade children that investing effort to create an object of beauty is an ideal worthy of celebration. Making beauty has an advantage over obtaining ‘A’ grades because others can share in the enjoyment of a beautiful product; only the self enjoys high grades” (2009, p. 34). He also reports that an advantage of the arts is that they encourage students to work together as a group and focus on each other instead of the focus on individual work, which is typical of academic classes (Kagan, 2009, p. 34).

Eisner writes: “Work in the arts is not only a way of creating performances and products; it is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning, establishing contact with others, and sharing a culture” (2004, p. 3).

These are all skills that are much less likely to be attained from other academic classes.

Furthermore, he writes: “Education...is the process of learning to create ourselves, and it is what the arts, both as a process and as the fruits of that process, promote” (Eisner, 2004, p. 3). The arts teach many lessons that are not likely learned in the classroom environment created by more traditional classes. Much of traditional learning has to do with following rules and coming up with the one right answer. Therefore, the arts are important to open the students’ minds up to other possibilities and ways of thinking.

The majority of art education research has been on whether or not it is beneficial and valuable for students, especially when schools must pass standardized tests and face budget costs. However, there seems to be a hole in the research. I have not found much research that compares what exactly goes on in art classrooms that enables a different type of learning and encourages different types of skills and abilities. There is a possibility that it is less the arts that make a difference, but more the type of environment created. This is important to research

because there is a possibility that these benefits can be experienced in any classroom through changing the classroom dynamics and teacher intentions instead of changing the content taught.

Methods

I began my study as a participant observer in a nearby elementary school so that I could get to know the teacher, teaching artist and students within the classroom. Since I was involved in the program and classroom already for another class, it was beneficial for this project because I was not only seen as someone coming in to observe the classroom, but I was actually a part of the program and therefore was able to get to know each of the members better. After deciding on my research topic, I asked if I could observe the classroom during math classes so that I could understand how those classes looked in comparison with the arts movement classes. I took many field notes while participating in the arts movement class as well as while watching the math classes. I spent 10 one-hour sessions with the arts movement class and spent 3 thirty-minute sessions in a math classroom.

I sent out an e-mail to all participating teachers and teaching artists and I was able to interview three teaching artists and two participating teachers to ask about their experience working with the program as well as their perceptions of how the students reacted to it. I have replaced all names and schools with pseudonyms to protect the privacy of all participants. Due to scheduling conflicts and time constraints, I was not able to schedule interviews in person. However, I was able to conduct interviews through e-mail and sent follow-up e-mails if I wanted further explanations or if I had any other questions. Each interview began with a list of five questions and I got back several sentences for each question from each interviewee. The following five questions were asked to all participants:

1. What has your experience been with the Moving Matters! program? Positive or negative?
2. What do you think about how the program has been implemented? Could it be improved?
3. Have you noticed any changes in the students that you believe to be a result of this program – good or bad?
4. Would you want to participate in this program again?
5. Do you think the arts are important for students? Why or why not?

I was also curious to see what the students believed about the value of art programs in schools. Due to time constraints, I was not able to get permission to speak with the students in the classroom, but I was able to use their writing prompts. Each student was required to write two separate responses about the arts and what they teach. These were helpful in gauging what the students' felt about the arts as well as whether or not they thought the arts are valuable.

There were several limitations that occurred throughout this research project. First, there were several unexpected snow days in the beginning, which postponed class sessions and therefore made it more difficult to get in touch with the teachers and teaching artists for interviews. Second, the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and spring break took place when I was supposed to do the majority of the data collection for the project. The CMT's became the school's top priority and we were not allowed to go to the school to work with the students during that period. However, we were still able to re-schedule and meet for all 10 sessions. Finally, due to the short amount of time given for the research project, there was a smaller sample size, but I was still able to collect quality data.

Data and Analysis

There were several themes that arose from the data. First, the curricular design and intentions of the teachers differed for the movement class and the math class. Second, the level and type of student participation was very different. Third, the behavior and attitudes of the students as well as the interactions between students appeared to be significantly different when comparing the two classes. The art movement program enabled a shift in classroom dynamics, which encourages students to participate more, work as a group and utilizes different skills and abilities than during the math class.

I. Teacher Intentions and Goals

The arts movement class and the math class were held in the same classroom, although the classrooms looked very different from each other. In the math classroom, the desks were organized in small groups all facing the blackboard, with students often facing the backs of other students in the room. During the arts movement sessions, the students were asked to push all of the desks to the walls of the classroom to create an open space in the middle so that everyone could sit in a circle and see one another. I wrote: “The students seem to really enjoy sitting in a circle. One girl said she liked it because she could see all of the other students instead of looking at their backs. It seems to reinforce the idea that everyone is of equal importance and value in the classroom and that everyone is meant to contribute and participate” (Field notes from February 23, 2011). Small changes, even in the set-up of the classroom can shift the learning process that goes on within the classroom.

There were differences in the way that the teachers taught and interacted with the students. The teacher did almost all of the talking in the math class, with little time spent on class

discussions or asking questions. During the math class “There was very little opportunity for students to interact with one another. Whenever the teacher did ask a question, there would be two or three hands raised and the same students raised their hands for each question. Two of the boys in the back had the wrong worksheet out and one girl did not have anything on her desk” (Field notes from April 6, 2011). The teacher in the class facilitated all discussions and “The teacher expected one right answer from the students when she asked questions. The teacher asked a student to demonstrate how to complete the problem and when a boy started to do it a different way than how the class was shown, the teacher told him that it was wrong. The student had the right answer and had another correct way of solving the problem” (Field notes from April 13, 2011). There was no emphasis on thinking about things from different points of view.

Although the teaching artist was technically in charge of the arts class, every student was encouraged to facilitate discussions in the class. On March 2, I wrote: “The teaching artist began by asking the class what the arts mean to them. One girl answered that they help cheer her up when she is upset. A boy in the class built on what she said by saying that music helps cheer him up when he is upset and also helps him to stop fighting with his brother” (Field notes from March 2, 2011). Instead of answering the question individually, the students really began to listen and to think about what the other students were saying and respond to that. Another girl commented saying that she liked talking in our group because everyone’s answers were correct because the teaching artist really emphasized how there are many different ways to think about something and that ideas can always be changed to make more sense. I also wrote: “One boy who always got in trouble in the math class for acting out came up to me and said that his favorite part about the arts program is that he felt it was something he was good at. He explained how he is not very smart in his other classes, but this is something that makes him feel good in

school” (Field notes from April 27, 2011). This type of program creates an environment in which many different skills and abilities are used, therefore providing many opportunities for students to succeed and raise their confidence.

Additionally, the teacher intentions of group dynamics were different in the two classes. When the students worked on the activities or worksheets in math, they either worked alone or in pairs with little regard to how the rest of the class was doing. I wrote: “There were three pairs of students that were much further behind than the rest of the class on the worksheet. No one seems to notice that they are behind and no one is helping them catch up. The students are very focused on completing their own worksheet. The group that finished first began to brag that they were the best and that they were smarter than the rest of the class” (Field notes from April 13, 2011). The focus of the classroom was much more on individual achievement rather than working together as a group or community. Conversely, during the arts class, there were very few times that the students were not all working and collaborating together. I wrote: “Today the teaching artist explained the program and how it would work. She said that the class would work together to create a dance and then perform it with the other classes at the final performance. She wants everyone to help come up with ideas for the dance because the dance will only be successful if everyone participates and gets involved” (Field notes from February 14, 2011). The emphasis and focus of the arts class was really on group achievement and working together as a group.

II. Increased Participation

The type and level of student participation was very different when comparing the math and arts classes. In the math class, there were several occasions where students had their heads on their desks and seemed tired. Students could get away with not participating in this type of classroom environment by either not completing the assignment or not participating in the

discussion. I wrote: “Today the students seem especially tired. Halfway through the math class, I noticed that three boys and one girl had their heads down on the desk and were not paying attention to the teacher. When I asked one of the boys why he was not doing the worksheet, he responded saying that there was no point in doing the worksheet because he did not want to” (Field notes from April 20, 2011). Some of the students had no motivation to do the worksheets and therefore refused to even try.

During the art class that same day, the boy who refused to do his math worksheet was one of the most enthusiastic. When we walked into the classroom, “He jumped out of his seat and started pushing his desk aside. He then ran over to tell us how he had made up his own language and dance with another girl in the class and asked if they could show the rest of the class what they came up with” (Field notes from April 20, 2011). This shift in the student’s behavior and attitude was very noticeable and had an impact on his ability to learn and pay attention in class. Sarah, one of the teaching artists said: “I have witnessed students who continually get in trouble and exhibit negative attitudes shift when we are there and become active participants recognizing their value to the process.” The effect of the arts class has been especially noticeable for students showing little interest in their other academic classes. Additionally, “Two girls came up to me today to tell me that Wednesday is now their favorite day of the week. When I asked why, they responded that it was because they looked forward to the arts movement class and wished that we came every day” (Field notes from March 2, 2011). This class gave students something to look forward to and made them excited to go to school on the days we met.

III. Higher Levels of Acceptance

The arts program also created an environment that encouraged a higher level of acceptance and understanding. In the math class, the focus was largely on “right” or “wrong”

answers. The teacher taught the class one correct way to solve problems and the students had very little freedom to choose what they did throughout the class. I wrote: “The teacher handed out two worksheets and even told the students which one they had to complete first. When told what to do, the students are expected to follow the directions or they will get in trouble” (Field notes from April 20, 2011). The students do not get much control over their learning in the math class. Additionally, the focus on right or wrong answers puts students in that mindset and they make judgments with a narrower mindset and way of thinking as well as setting up a more competitive environment.

On the contrary, the arts class provides an opportunity for students to direct their own learning. There is less structure, which allows for discussions to last as long as the students want and also allows for the students to decide what they want to do. Mike, a teaching artist, said: “They learn to behave, to listen, to understand...The arts teach self-expressions and a higher level of acceptance.” One day, the students really wanted to each demonstrate one movement that might be added into the class dance. They all went around in a circle and came up with different dances, and many of those movements were included in the final dance. I wrote that “The students were all very energetic and enthusiastic when showing their dance moves. One girl was hesitant and seemed nervous but the rest of the class cheered her on and encouraged her. She stood up in front of the class and showed her move and the rest of the students told her that they thought it was really great. She sat back down with a huge smile on her face” (Field notes from April 13, 2011). The high level of acceptance within the classroom has really affected the comfort level as well as the self-confidence of the students. Meredith, one of the teachers said “I may really be seeing another level of comfort amongst my students.” The students showed much more support for one another in the arts class in comparison with the math class. Meredith also

said: “The arts give students the opportunity to explore, recognize talents or just what brings them enjoyment.” The arts class really emphasizes active participation, which gives the students a sense of importance and value as well as something to be proud of.

IV. Increased Motivation

This also seemed to increase the type of motivation the students exhibited. From the start of the sessions, the students were a part of moving the desks aside and many offered to set up the CD player. The students seemed eager to participate and started to show signs of being accountable for the learning. When watching her class, one teacher, Meredith, said: “I see a little of my students holding each other accountable for knowing what to do.” On March 2nd, I wrote: “The students are exhibiting a sense of importance and community and a sense that they are not only participating for themselves but also for the rest of the class as well. When we were practicing our dance, two boys did not stand up and get in the right spot. I was waiting for the teaching artist to say something otherwise I would have. However, instead of either of us saying something, the rest of the boys in the class started cheering for them to get in line so that they could begin” (Field notes from March 2, 2011). One of the teaching artists, Sarah, said: “The students within each class come to understand they are part of a community that needs each and every person for their project to be successful.” In comparison with the math class where students rarely even noticed if someone was not participating, this environment increases both the motivation as well as the participation for the students. Instead of the kids just worrying about their own positioning and movements, they started to make sure everyone else was doing their part and taking it seriously. It seemed as if the students were really beginning to take the learning and motivation into their own hands, feeling ownership over the entire groups’ actions.

V. Student Interactions with Peers

One of the most valuable aspects of the arts movement class was that it provided an opportunity for the students to create something as a group. Many of the students come from diverse backgrounds and so this dance is something that each student will have in common with one another that does not rely on race, class or ethnicity. Meredith said: “I know working on a common project, such as this performance, is important because students are part of creating something special together. I hope this leads to my students feeling more confident and proud as they display their talent.” This idea of creating something as a group became a major theme in the interviews. There were around 25 students in the classroom, and of those 25, only 3 had been part of some outside art program before. Another teacher, Lisa, said: “I have found it to be a wonderful experience for the children. Most of them have not had many experiences such as those of their neighboring suburban peers, and I feel it is a wonderful opportunity and experience they can take with them – especially the final performance.” Both of these teachers illustrate the value in this type of program and the environment in which it creates for the students.

Additionally, the conversations that have been sparked as a result of the arts program are much deeper and more in depth than the typical conversations in the math classroom. Instead of talking about facts or formulas like in the math classroom, this arts program allowed for flexibility and spontaneity. The students are asked questions about their lives and other things that are important to them. For example, on February 16, “Today’s discussion was about the various cultures the students came from. Two girls showed the class a Puerto Rican dance that they both knew and one boy sang a song that his grandparents taught him. Another boy said how that song was similar to one that his parents listened to” (Field notes from February 16, 2011). These types of conversations also allow the students to realize that they have more in common

with each other than they likely realized. On February 21, I wrote: “In the first few sessions I heard the students mostly talking about T.V. shows and movies that they liked. Today I heard a group of four girls talking about their families and what they liked to do together. Much of what they said was similar and they got excited that they had that in common” (Field notes from February 21, 2011). The students made more of an effort to really get to know one another at a deeper level than before, which provided more opportunities to relate to one another.

Conclusion

All in all, this study has several important implications for the field of education. With budgeting costs and standards assessments, the arts tend to be the first cut from school programs. Courses such as math and reading are emphasized more while art education is devalued regardless of the research showing how valuable the arts are for students. The arts not only have the ability to raise test scores, they also increase student participation and motivation, help students to interact better with each other and focus on many skills and abilities not emphasized during core classes. However, the most important finding from this study is that it may be the teacher intentions and goals in curricular design that matters more than the classroom content. I found that this type of arts movement program enabled a shift in the classroom environment, which encouraged the changes in the students. It may not be what the teachers are teaching necessarily, but how the students are responding differently to the classroom dynamics that is important. The design of the art program created an environment that encouraged a different type of learning to occur, teaching confidence, persistence, creation and active participation and the students may be reacting to that focus.

Additionally, this study emphasizes that there must be a change in the dynamics and intentions of the classroom in order for these results to be experienced. Just adding an art class

into a school will not necessarily lead to these results because that art class may focus on the same goals and interactions as the other core classes. For example, if an art teacher focuses on individual achievement, lack of student decisions and discussions, then there may not be a shift in the learning process. Similarly, if a core subject teacher does enable a collaborative working environment and active participation and increased motivation, then the students may reap similar benefits to the ones found in this study. Therefore, it is less about the content and more about the goals and dynamics of the classroom.

Therefore, future research should focus on what changes the student experience as well as the learning process that occurs in art classes to find out if it is what the teacher is doing and how the students are responding differently to the classroom dynamics.

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