This research was a service project solicited by ArtStart, a program ran by ArtsTeach, a non-profit organization who was supported in part by the research grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Abstract: The use of arts-integration to enhance student learning is a practice grounded in empirical research. A 2003 report by the National Association of State Boards of education (NASBE) highlighted the substantial body of research showing benefits of arts in educational curriculum and also called for stronger emphasis on the arts in educational curriculum. The purpose of this study was to highlight one arts-integration program in one school district that was a collaboration between the school district and a local arts and science council. This study highlights the findings of an external evaluation of the program conducted by researchers at a local university. Data from Teaching Artists (TAs), Classroom Teachers (CTs), school arts teachers, and external evaluators were used to provide evidence of the effectiveness of the program. Findings indicated that the goals of the program were met and allowed for the external evaluators to make recommendations to program stakeholders.
In a 2003 report, "The Complete Curriculum: Ensuring a Place for the Arts and Foreign Languages in American Schools" a study group from the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE, 2003) noted that a substantial body of research highlighted the benefits of arts in educational curriculum and called for stronger emphasis on the arts and foreign language. More recently, a report by Keven McCarthy, Elizabeth Ondaatje, Arthur Brooks, and Andras Szanto (2005) on the visual arts suggested that the art experience, "can connect people more deeply to the world and open them to new ways of seeing," creating the foundation to forge social bonds and community cohesion. Strong arts programming in schools helps close a gap that has left many children behind (Rabkin & Redmond, 2006, p. 3).

In response to research about the importance of arts education, one large and progressive urban school district in the southeastern portion of the United States recognized the need to enhance arts education in its schools as a way to bolster student achievement and meet curricular goals. The school district, in partnership with an arts and science council, formed a local non-profit arts organization to develop arts-integration programming for 3rd and 4th grade classrooms aligned with curriculum. This organization ran several arts-integration programs at the time of this research, including the subject of this research, ArtStart.

Partially supported by a grant from the United States Department of Education, the overarching goals of ArtStart were to: (a) foster cooperation among Teaching Artists (TAs), Classroom Teachers (CTs), and arts teachers to make the arts an integral part of learning; (b) inspire students to think critically and use multiple intelligences to advance literacy learning; (c) generate opportunities for students and teachers to increase individual creativity by working with practicing local artists; and (d) support district, state, and national standards for literacy. Each academic year, the goals of the program were made more specific to focus on certain areas of interest. The primary goals of ArtStart were:

1) Support increased academic achievement for all students, especially in 3rd and 4th grade writing;

2) Help teachers and TAs grow in their use of high quality, arts-integrated instruction; and

3) Foster strong, collaborative relationships between TAs, CTs, and arts teachers.

To gather more feedback regarding the potential effectiveness of ArtStart, four additional areas of interest were assessed. Those four areas were:

1) Increase students’ appreciation for the arts;
2) Increase students’ engagement in classroom activities;
3) Decrease students’ disruptive behaviors in the classroom; and
4) Increase students’ attendance at school.

The purpose of this research is to provide a contextual summative program evaluation of ArtStart in order to give evidence of the impact of arts education in the form of arts-integration in schools.

Methodology

Participants

ArtStart participants were 3rd and 4th grade students, CTs, TAs, and often arts teachers. CTs varied depending on the participating school. In some instances it was a regular classroom teacher while in other instances the CT was a physical education teacher, dance teacher, art teacher, or music teacher. Sometimes there was a CT who was designated by ArtsTeach to be the lead instructor at the school and other arts teachers were not involved. In all, 39 schools participated in the program. Fourteen individuals or organizations served as TAs. TAs were approved artists from the local community and surrounding area who were trained to use arts-integration in schools. There art forms varied widely.

Context

To begin preparation for the upcoming academic year and provide some foundation for the formation of relationships between CTs and TAs, a four-day ArtStart workshop was held in the preceding summer. School leaders who had chosen to participate in ArtStart were required to have a representative attend the workshop. During the workshop, CTs and TAs concurrently received training on how to integrate arts into the classroom. In addition, CTs from each school
collaborated to design lesson plans using elements of music, theatre, storytelling, dance, and/or visual arts. The lesson plans were collected and made available on the ArtsTeach website.

On the last day of the July workshop, the TAs performed during an artist showcase to demonstrate their art form to the CTs and also how they would integrate arts into the classroom during a residency. After the showcase, teachers met with the TAs and decided with whom they wished to work during the upcoming school year by ranking their preferences on a form. After the workshop, ArtsTeach staff matched each school with a TA in accordance with the teachers’ requests.

Once TAs were assigned to schools, an initial meeting was held between the TA, CTs, and an ArtsTeach staff member to review the Art in the Classroom goals and to create lesson plans for the residency. The goal for the program was to use arts-integrated lessons to enhance literacy. Each CT was entitled to six hours of an in-class residency where arts-integrated instruction was to be presented by the TA with the active support of the CT. At the conclusion of each residency, all parties were expected to meet to evaluate program strengths and weaknesses and to offer suggestions for future arts integration activities.

Data Collection and Analysis

Six external evaluators from a large university located in the vicinity of the school district conducted an external evaluation of the ArtStart program. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. To identify the extent to which ArtStart goals were accomplished, 66 classroom observations were conducted by evaluators. The evaluators took field notes during the arts-integrated lessons and stayed for the duration of the lesson. Evaluators, CTs and TAs also completed a survey. The survey contained questions about the success of the implementation of the program and their perception of how well the goals of the program were met. The survey employed a five-point Likert scale and also included space for justification for their ratings. The Likert scale items were rated from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Participants could choose a rating of zero if they felt the item was not applicable. Scores greater than 3 suggested support for the item. In addition to the survey and field notes, evaluators reviewed student work, instructional methods, and informally interviewed CTs, TAs, and students. The informal interviews took the form of sidebar conversations during, before, or after the residency. In most cases the actual conversation was not captured but the evaluator took notes of the conversation immediately following. Descriptive data from the surveys was compiled using SPSS. Qualitative data from the surveys and anecdotal information from the informal interviews was used to support the quantitative findings.

Results

Evaluation findings suggest that all three ArtStart goals were met and that two of the four additional areas of interest were evaluated positively. We will address each goal in order and then proceed to address each area of interest in order.

Overall, CTs, TAs, and evaluators all indicated that they believed the ArtStart program increased academic achievement for 3rd and 4th grade students in reading and writing (Goal #1). Although TAs in separate 3rd and 4th grade classrooms rated this item as “agree,” four TAs who worked with combined 3rd/4th grade classrooms rated this item 3.25 (slightly above “no opinion”), suggesting that achievement was difficult to evaluate when residencies were spread between many classrooms or grade levels. The evaluators agreed that this goal was met with 3rd grade and combined 3rd/4th grade classrooms. However, for the 4th grade only, this item received a mean score of 3.63, between “no opinion” and “agree.” Individual classroom activities within the 4th grade residencies contributed to these scores, which ranged from 2 (“disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”).

The mean scores for this goal were higher among CTs than TAs and evaluators, likely due to the increased opportunities of teachers to influence students’ academic achievement. Results of the qualitative component of this study revealed that CTs’ comments about their students’ achievement were positive. For example: “Students have been able to make the connection between writing a story and composing music. Their knowledge and understanding have been enhanced.” Another teacher stated, “The writing is much better. The students are using specific details in writing.” Evaluators noted that in residencies where the teacher felt there was an increase in
achievement, the CT and TA demonstrated a respectful partnership, shared responsibility for the outcome of the residency, and evidence of diligent planning.

Residencies were conducted during relatively short periods of time -- normally six hours total. In some cases, the length of the residency combined with the type of residency the school and TA had constructed made it difficult for teachers to assess academic achievement. One teacher stated “...I’m not sure five days really changed their achievement.” In this particular residency, the art teacher and the TA were the lead instructors for creating a visual art project that included writing, but the residency was conducted in the art room and the CT did not have a role in the instruction. At another school, a CT responded with the comment, “It has not increased their achievement (lack of time), but it has increased their exposure and imagination.” This particular CT was an art teacher involved in the residency with the TA and the students’ regular classroom teacher was not involved in the residency.

Conversations with the TAs revealed increases in academic achievement in individual students but not necessarily with whole classrooms of students. One TA commented, “I hope that it does [increase academic achievement] but I have no way of measuring.” For the TA to be able to assess this goal, open communication with the classroom teacher was vital. To this point, one teaching artist commented, “I only work with students a few hours so I must base my judgment on the teacher’s opinion. She rated this goal as 5 (strongly agree).”

External evaluators agreed that this goal was generally met but that it was difficult to evaluate. In many cases, the only evidence of increased achievement came from conversations with the classroom teacher. One external evaluator commented, “I was asked to help proof-read students’ work during the residency because there was a shortage of adults in the room at the time to fill this role. In doing so, I could see students trying to improve their writing by adding details or looking up words for correct spellings. This helped me to evaluate this goal positively.”

End-of-Grade (EOG) reading standardized test scores were obtained at the conclusion of the academic year. In order to analyze these scores, ArtStart classrooms were matched to non-ArtStart classrooms based on demographics. Only 3rd and 4th grade EOG classroom means were examined as some of the CTs in the program taught a special subject that was not tested (PE, Drama, Art, Music, etc.) and some CTs were literacy facilitators who taught multiple groups of students. Residencies completed in March, April, and May on average had higher mean EOG scores (332.18) than those completed in the first half of the school year (August through December)(328.81). Differences between the non-Art in the Classroom (342.88) and Art in the Classroom (342.75) mean scores were negligible.

Overall, CTs, TAs, and evaluators believed that Art in the Classroom helped teachers and teaching artists grow in their use high-quality, arts-integrated lessons (Goal #2). For items related to this goal, both the CTs and TAs had mean scores corresponding to “agree” when asked to evaluate their own use of high quality arts-integrated instruction. When TAs were asked to evaluate the CTs’ ability, the mean scores ranged from 2.92 (slightly below “no opinion”) to 3.75 (slightly below “agree”). The mean scores of the evaluators ranged up to 4.47 (“agree”) in the 3rd grade classrooms.

The CTs rated this goal higher than did both the TAs and the evaluators. Most teachers felt that they had learned valuable skills that could be used even after the residency ended. One teacher commented, “The summer training does an excellent job with this. It is always impressive. It truly makes me think outside the regular classroom routines when planning lessons.” Another teacher stated that, “Before this summer’s training I would have used art (drawing) and possibly music, but I would not have considered using dance. Now, it’s a great option for me.” Along with the training provided by ArtsTeach, teachers also felt that they learned about specific techniques by working with their assigned teaching artist. Comments included, “This is a very weak area for me; I’m glad I attended the sessions and had a very good working relationship with our resident artist.”

For this goal, only one CT gave a rating of “disagree.” That CT was an art teacher. Three CTs gave this item a rating of “no opinion” and responded with comments such as, “I have new ideas, but time for instruction that varies from the pacing guide is difficult to find” and “I feel like I use theatre and art
anyways. I’m not sure how to use it in a more efficient way, which I was hoping to gain.”

TAs were asked two similar questions in relation to this goal. One question was phrased so that they evaluated their own ability to use high-quality arts-integrated instruction and the other question evaluated the classroom teacher’s ability. TAs overall scored themselves higher on this item than did the classroom teachers. Some TAs were optimistic that their teaching methods had an impact on the classroom teachers by commenting that, “I didn’t have much knowledge on how much the teachers used the arts in the classroom, but I do believe the residency has left them with tools and techniques to implement in the classroom.” Other TAs were not so optimistic in evaluating the teacher’s ability to use arts-integration lessons and offered comments such as, “More partnership is needed” and “I cannot see the growth.” Evaluators noted that unless open communication and trust existed between the CT and the TA, the TA often did not know what the CT would do when the teaching artist was not present.

During many residencies, the TA was the dominant instructor and therefore knowing what the CT did while he/she was not in the classroom was difficult to evaluate. However, on one occasion a CT said that she had worked for five years with the same TA through the ArtStart program and that they had established a close relationship. As a result, she had knowledge of many different methods of teaching literacy through arts-integration.

Overall, CTs and TAs believed that ArtStart fostered strong, collaborative relationships between teaching artists, classroom teachers, and arts teachers (Goal #3). The mean scores on items related to this goal were rated higher by the CT and TA than by evaluators. Mean scores for the CTs ranged from 4.18 (slightly above “agree”) to 4.63 (slightly below “strongly agree”). The CTs as a whole felt that there was a positive relationship established with the TAs. Comments supporting this positive evaluation of this goal included, “Our planning session flowed very well. We were able to make connections immediately.” Another comment was, “I have worked with ArtStart for a number of years and have developed a relationship with some of the agencies and their artists.”

Three CTs who rated this item as “disagree” felt little positive relationship with the teaching artist. One teacher stated, “We were able to work together, but there seemed to be a lot of miscommunication along the way.” Another CT from the same school said, “The work expected in the residency required too much work outside of the time the TA was in the classroom and the scale of the project was too large for the students.”

The TAs’ mean scores ranged from 3.50 (“no opinion”) to 4.38 (“agree”). TAs as a whole felt that they had strong relationships with teachers, but their experiences varied. Several TAs rated this item 5.00 (“strongly agree”). Only one TA rated it 1.00 (“strongly disagree”). That TA spoke candidly with the evaluator about her negative experiences with the residency. She perceived a lack of involvement by the CT and felt that an inability to communicate with the teacher despite her efforts.

The evaluators rated the item about the relationship to the art teacher lower (2.21 to 2.91) than did the CTs (3.75 to 4.03). This discrepancy was due to the fact that in most residencies the CT was not an art teacher and therefore the school art teachers were either uninvolved or involved only in the absence of the CT. As a result, evidence of their relationship with the CTs was difficult to assess.

The evaluators noted that the personal relationship between CTs and TAs was the primary determining factor in the accomplishment of this goal. In some cases, CTs neither attended the initial planning meeting nor responded to electronic mail messages or telephone calls from the TAs. This lack of communication in some residencies was detrimental to the success of the residency and the creation of a professional working relationship between the classroom teacher and the teaching artist.

With regard to the four areas of interest, each was evaluated positively. Overall, CTs, TAs, and evaluators believed the Art in the Classroom program increased students’ appreciation for the arts. No appreciable differences were found between the 3rd and 4th grade classrooms. Mean scores for the item related to this area of interest were between 4.00 (“agree”) and 4.85 (slightly lower than “strongly agree”). The range of scores for this item were between 2 (“disagree”) and 5 (“strongly agree”).

Overall, CTs, TAs, and evaluators believed the Art in the Classroom program increased students’ engagement in classroom activities. No appreciable
differences were found between the 3rd and 4th grade classrooms. Mean scores for the item related to this area of interest ranged from 4.24 (slightly higher than “agree”) to 4.77 (slightly lower than “strongly agree”). Score ranged from 2 (“disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The few CTs who rated this item lower suggested that any increase in student engagement was due more to the novelty of ArtStart and not to the activities inherent in ArtStart.

Overall, CTs, TAs, and evaluators believed the ArtStart program did not necessarily impact students’ disruptive behaviors in classroom activities. No appreciable differences were found between the 3rd and 4th grade classrooms. Mean scores for the item related to this area of interest ranged from 2.75 (slightly below “no opinion”) to 3.50 (slightly below “agree”). TAs and evaluators felt that because they did not know the level of disruptive behavior prior to the residency that this item was difficult to evaluate. A few CTs commented that while engaging their students, ArtStart activities sometimes increased disruptive behaviors because students were excited. However, evaluators noted that in residencies in which the TA and CT a strong collaborative partnership that disruptive behaviors were limited because both professionals assisted with classroom management.

Overall, classroom teachers, teaching artists, and evaluators believed the ArtStart program did not necessarily impact students’ attendance at school. No appreciable differences were found between the 3rd and 4th grade classrooms. Mean scores for the item related to this area of interest ranged from 2.00 (“disagree”) to 3.25 (slightly above “no opinion”). TAs and evaluators felt that they could not evaluate the impact of the Art in the Classroom program on attendance. One CT reported that a student had told her that he came to school that day because he wanted to participate in the residency; however, most CTs did not observe an appreciable impact on student attendance.

Discussion

Three issues impacted the extent to which ArtStart Goal #1 was attained. The first issue influencing academic achievement was how well the TAs conducted activities designed to enhance critical thinking skills. Evaluators noted while observing the residencies that some TAs engaged students well and often increased the students' appreciation for their art forms; however, activities designed to enhance students' critical thinking skills were often less evident. One evaluator's comment represented this finding when she wrote, "Although I saw improvements in students' communication and interest, I saw little direct tie-in of the artist's work with students' thinking skills." One suggestion for future projects like this would be to attempt to ensure that TAs conduct activities designed to enhance students' critical thinking skills.

Another issue impacting potential academic achievement is the extent to which the CTs’ learning objectives were supported by the activities of the TA. In many cases, teachers had been involved in the selection of the TAs and had chosen those artists to augment specific learning activities in their classrooms. In those classrooms, the coordinated efforts of the CTs and TAs resulted in enhanced critical thinking by students. However, in some cases, the CTs had not selected the artists and sometimes knew little about the ways in which the TAs could facilitate learning. In those classrooms, students' critical thinking was often not enhanced around the desired outcomes of the teachers. One suggestion for future projects is to make CTs more involved in the selection of their partnering TA.

An issue impacting the evaluators’ ability to measure academic achievement is the lack of random assignment of students to classrooms under investigation. Random assignment of students mitigates pre-existing differences between groups of students within a population. It allows evaluators to determine whether differences in outcomes (e.g., reading achievement) are attributable to treatments being imposed (e.g., ArtStart) or to differences in the students that may have existed before the students became involved in the project. If random assignment of students to ArtStart classrooms is impossible, evaluators should attempt to match classrooms (i.e., students’ performance in classrooms should be compared only when students within those classrooms were similar in age, sex, socioeconomic backgrounds, and relevant knowledge and skills).

The second goal of the ArtStart program was to help teachers to learn to use more arts-integrated lessons. This was difficult to evaluate as the CTs participating in ArtStart activities changed frequently.
The list of participants in the summer workshops often differed significantly from the list of teachers who had subsequently accessed the lesson plans on the Internet. Similarly, the list of teachers and administrators who attended the showcases was often quite different than the list of summer workshop participants and the list of those who accessed web-based lesson plans. All three of these lists often differed from the list of residency participants. Although a few educators were involved in all ArtStart activities, most were not. Constant changes in participants made investigation of the impact of ArtStart activities problematic. One way to allow for better evaluation of the teacher’s use of arts-integration lessons is to attempt to emphasize continuity of participation in all ArtStart activities.

ArtStart Goal #3 was to foster relationships between the CT, TA, and other arts teachers at the school. The extent to which school administrators supported the teachers and TAs' efforts during the residencies seemed to have impact on this goal. In some schools, administrators were very aware of ArtStart’s activities and were involved in meetings and events designed to enhance the impact of the TAs' efforts during the residencies. In other schools, administrators knew little or nothing about the residencies in their environments. Cooperation levels between teachers and TAs were significantly improved in schools where the principals and assistant principals were aware of and supported the planning and implementation of the residencies. The second issue influencing the success of this goal was the extent to which teachers and artists had a clear understanding of their roles. In some cases, the CT had participated in the summer workshop and had also used arts-infused lessons in their classrooms. In other cases, the CT had not participated in the summer workshop but still been allowed to have a TA residency. As a result, these teachers' understanding of how to interact with the TAs in order to establish relationships was limited. The third issue was the interest of the participants. Evaluators observed that some teachers seemed complacent and even apathetic toward the use of the arts in their classrooms. Interactions between those teachers and the TAs were often less than collaborative. Secondarily, evaluators determined that the primary vehicle for accomplishing this goal were the showcases during the July workshop, followed by the residencies that occurred in selected schools. A few relationships were initiated during the showcase as teachers and artists interacted and then those relationships deepened during the residency. One suggestion for future projects is to create opportunities for more relationship building during the summer workshop and to enhance those relationships by providing opportunities for collaboration throughout the year.

The general success of the ArtStart program suggested that infusion of the arts into elementary school curricula can result in many positive outcomes related to student learning and development. However, as this study revealed, infusion and administration of an arts program in the schools is not without difficulties. To the extent that the ArtStart staff and program participants can rectify the shortcomings noted in this study, the ArtStart program will continue to offer tremendous contributions to student learning and related outcomes in the future. In addition, school districts with similar goals will be able to learn from the experiences of the ArtStart program.

References