

Arts Integration: A Proposal for Transformative Education Reform and Critical Pedagogy in New York City Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

In a post-pandemic world, what can education look like? What can arts integration offer as a transformative education reform in New York City? As a former NYC middle school dance teacher, current Director of Education in Musical Theater, and daughter of arts educators, I've seen the benefits of arts integration first hand where student engagement increases, and students achieve better academic results. The following article details New York City schools chancellor's desire to change the reading curriculum and start a "massive turnaround" in New York City schools. It highlights the latest state test scores and reading curriculum overhaul, and instead calls for a more transformative education reform by using the National A+ Schools Program model, offering not just a new curriculum model but an arts-based pedagogy as well. The National A+ Schools Program is research-based with proven results for nearly 30 years, and while it will not be easy, it is certainly possible.

INTRODUCTION

My eighth grade drama teacher used to tease that my family was the VonTrapp family 2.0. Perhaps it is because everyone in my family has some musical ability, or maybe it is because my family sings “Happy Birthday” and Christmas carols in six-part harmony. Either way, I had a very artistic childhood filled with music, dance and theatre. My family is filled with arts educators: my grandparents were music teachers, my dad was a band director, and my mom was a math and music teacher. The arts and education were viewed with equal importance in our family; my mom used to assign my brother and I summer homework in addition to whatever the school assigned. My brother and I both went into artistic fields. He plays French horn and trumpet, and is a budding composer in Nashville. I became a full time arts educator, teaching middle school dance at a charter school in the South Bronx and recently transitioned into a new position as the Associate Director of Education in Musical Theater at 92NY.

During my tenure teaching middle school, I had boots firmly on the school ground, working closely with the non-arts content teachers and serving as an advisor to many students. I was passionate about finding ways to bring content the students were learning in their core classes into my dance lessons. As a form of assessment, I created “Dance Composition Fridays” centered around what we had been learning over the course of the week. I gave my students requirements on specific dance steps that needed to be included, a particular choreographic device or element of dance to use, and how many counts of eight their composition needed to be. As this was a group assignment, I informed my students that the group's work ethic and teamwork would also be considered in this assessment. My students loved it because within the guidelines of the assessment, they had an outlet for a free, creative form of expression. As long as they hit all of the requirements, they could include their current favorite TikTok dance. My classroom was filled with noise in the best possible way: productive, engaged chatter, music and a lot of “5, 6, 7, 8.”

Considering my goal of bringing core content into my dance classes, I expanded the concept of “Dance Composition Fridays” into a week of dance composition related to a curricular novel the students

were reading in English Language Arts (ELA). For example, the 7th grade was reading *The Outsiders*, so concurrently in dance class I created groups and assigned each a different chapter from the book. As a group they had to identify major plot points in the chapter to highlight in their composition, decide which characters each member would be portraying, interpret the chapter through movement, apply a choreographic device, have empathy towards each other's ideas while working together, and complete a self-assessment after the presentation. On presentation day, I invited their core content teachers and the school administrators into the dance classroom to enjoy. I did not realize it then, but I was already implementing part of Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) six facets of understanding. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), students have a true sense of understanding if they are able to explain the material, interpret it, apply it, have perspective, empathize, and have self-knowledge. Here, I was not only assessing my students' knowledge and understanding of dance skills and techniques, but also their social-emotional development and interpretation of *The Outsiders*. That particular composition assignment stands out for me not only for the performative and academic outcomes, but also the joy exuding from my students and their teachers.

Fast forward to spring of 2022. With the New York State Math test fast approaching, the school administration was concerned that many of our students would fail the test. My school turned into an "all-math" school for two weeks. Every teacher taught math, except the electives teachers (dance, art, theater, and chess). The electives teachers were responsible for the "Fun Rooms": if the students passed their morning math quiz they could go to a "Fun Room" in the afternoon while the remaining students received more targeted teaching. Leading a "Fun Room" was glorified babysitting and the students could choose to play board games, watch a movie, play chess, or draw. For those two weeks, I witnessed students coming into school tired, lethargic, and mentally spent—not to mention I disliked leading a "Fun Room" because it was unproductive and unengaging for me as a teacher.

Educational theorists including Jean Piaget (cognitive development), Leo Vygotsky (social constructivism), and Jerome Bruner (social-cognitive constructivism) emphasize that "learning is an active rather than passive process" wherein the learner's role is to construct their "own understandings of the world" and "the teacher's role is to facilitate this construction of knowledge in a variety of ways" (Fox, 2016,

p. 27). John Dewey (1959) emphasized the point of learning by doing. Dr. Lynn H. Fox (2016) writes on the theory of motivation indicating that students learn best when intrinsically motivated and feel they can successfully achieve the task or objective assigned. That said, students are not intrinsically motivated to learn a new math skill, let alone even come to school. Teachers have to create what my former assistant principal used to call “buy-in” in order to engage students thereby motivating them to learn.

My mom was a Florida public high school math teacher and, at one point in her career, was teaching students at the lowest academic level. My mom, being the creative person she is, taught the most engaging and active math classes. I was in elementary school at the time—so not in her high school math classroom—But hearing about her lessons has had such an impact on me that I am able to recall it in detail today. My mom had the students count their steps as they walked the perimeter of the school to identify perimeter and learn how to calculate area. Since she also had many athletes in her classes, she took them to the basketball court to learn fractions. The students took ten shots, counted the number of hoops made out of ten, simplified the fraction, and converted it into decimal and percentage. The most memorable was when she taught the metric system by rewriting the lyrics to DJ Casper’s “Cha Cha Slide” with her students. The students worked together in small groups, writing lyrics describing complex metric conversions, and the hops and stomps became the number of times you moved the decimal point. By the end, she had the whole class dancing the “Metric Slide”—the school principal even joined in! In this way, teaching and learning math can be what Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, and others refer to as an “active process.” My mom gained her students undivided attention with productive buy-in by incorporating their interests into the lessons thereby intrinsically motivating them to learn by doing, construct their own sense of understanding, retain the material, and feel successful in the process.

Teaching and learning can be joyous and innovative; it can be infused with arts-based learning tools so that students can gain multidimensional levels of knowledge, demonstrate their understanding of a particular topic using various artistic strategies, while teachers can grow in their own professional development and meet the needs of diverse learners in their classrooms. What I am referring to is arts integration.

DEFINING ARTS INTEGRATION

The Arts Education Partnership (2018) defines arts integration as “a holistic approach to educating students that involves incorporating arts competencies into other core school curricula.” Additionally, The Kennedy Center in the U.S. (n.d.) views arts integration as “an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both.” For clarity, core curriculum, as defined by the International Bureau of Education, is as follows:

The body of knowledge, skills and attitudes expected to be learned by all students, generally related to a set of subjects and learning areas that are common to all students, such as languages, mathematics, arts, physical education, science and social studies (n.d.).

For the purpose of this article, I use “core curriculum”/“core content subjects” to mean: math, science, English language arts, and social studies.

ACADEMICALLY SPEAKING

When I was teaching at the middle school level, the teachers and administrators were very determined to catch students up from the learning loss that had taken place over the course of the pandemic. If it was not “catch up time,” then the energy in the school was very much centered around test-prep. Even as the dance teacher, I would think to myself, “to what end is my purpose as an educator to ‘catch my students up’ and prepare them for tests?”

The New York Times (2022) published the 2022 reading and math state test scores across the nation which showed very few states reaching 42% proficiency in either subject. The scores dipped between 4th and 8th graders with higher scores among the 4th graders. In New York State, 28% of 4th graders and 28% of 8th graders are proficient in math; 30% of 4th graders and 32% of 8th graders are proficient in

reading.¹ The New York City Department of Education (2022) reports 37.9% of students in grades 3-8 are proficient in math and 49% of students in grades 3-8 are proficient in English language arts (ELA). Based on these results, I am more astounded that 62.1% of New York City students in grades 3-8 are NON-proficient in math and 51% of New York City students in grades 3-8 are NON-proficient in English Language Arts (ELA).

In May of 2023, the New York City schools' Chancellor, David C. Banks, stated that he intends to change the reading curriculum for New York City schools for the coming year. Banks realized that half of the city's children are not proficient in reading and apologized, saying, "It's not your fault. It's not your child's fault. It was our fault. This is the beginning of a massive turnaround" (as cited in Closson, 2023).

The "massive turnaround" Banks refers to means that over the next two years, New York City schools will adopt one of the following three curricula as selected by their district superintendents: Wit & Wisdom, Expeditionary Learning, and Into Reading (Closson, 2023). A recent study from the New York University Metro Center (2022) found that the Into Reading curriculum was culturally destructive in representation, social justice, and teacher's materials. For a segregated school system² like New York City, that does not sound like the best option or choice, and it is concerning that it was listed as one. Frankly, the Into Reading curriculum sounds more like a *turnback* than a *turnaround*.

If Banks wants to make a "massive turnaround," he should consider the research from the Center for Education Policy Research (CEPR) at Harvard University (2019) that shows curriculum usage alone does not improve student achievement. As the CEPR faculty director and study lead Tom Kane (2019) points out:

Some leaders may see the adoption of a new curriculum as an 'easy, inexpensive and quick' alternative to more controversial, expensive, or time-consuming policies such as teacher evaluation or classroom coaching. It may be a mistake to think of curriculum choice and teaching reforms as alternative ways of improving student outcomes. Rather, to gain the benefits of either, districts

¹ The testing data for New York City is open and available to the public on the [New York City Public Schools website](#).

² An in-depth data report on New York State's segregated school system, written by John Kucsera, can be accessed on the [Civil Rights Project website](#).

may need to do both (para. 8).

Curriculum is only as good as its user. How the curriculum is being taught for any given subject is just as important as the curriculum itself. Consider this: if there are four classrooms all learning the exact same curriculum, but one classroom has higher data results than the other three, it may be that the data is related to how the curriculum is being taught. What New York City needs is a new pedagogy in order to see any “massive turnaround.” Educators need a new pedagogical language in order to properly prepare students for careers in the 21st century and beyond; careers that require creative and innovative thinking. Author Daniel Pink stresses skills needed in a future job market include “empathy, knowledge of design, ability to think outside the box, independent/creative thinking” (as cited in Mardirosian & Lewis, 2016, p.4). Pink asserts that arts are fundamental rather than ornamental; affirming “the arts are essential to building the cognitive skills our kids will need to flourish in the 21st century” (as cited in Mardirosian & Lewis, 2016, p.4). In this post-pandemic world we have the opportunity to do something radical (dare I say “woke?”). Instead of simply introducing a new reading curriculum, Banks should mandate the use of arts integration to create a more holistic educational experience in every New York City public school. It is a huge undertaking, and as the former Producing Director of StageOne Louisville Children’s Theatre, Moses Goldberg (2006) points out:

In order to implement arts in the schools, educators need a clear understanding of *how* the arts can be implemented...there is still little understanding of *what* precisely needs to be done. If a school district made the decision to fully integrate arts as a core area in the curriculum, how exactly would they do it? Who would be responsible? How much would it—should it—cost? (p. 25).

Goldberg (2006) proposes a “three-legged stool” approach, based on an earlier publication from the Arts, Education and Americans Panel, *Coming to our Senses: the Significance of the Arts for American Education*. The three prongs of the three-legged stool are: arts instruction, arts processes incorporated into the classroom, and arts experiences. The first leg, arts instruction, is simply instruction in any of the major art forms, with advancement opportunities as students age

from middle to high school level. For many, this takes form as an elective. The second leg, arts processes (or arts integration) would involve classroom teachers utilizing “the mental processes integral to the arts as part of all of their classroom management and instruction” (Goldberg, 2006, p. 27). The third leg, arts experiences, consists of taking students to artistic experiences outside of the classroom, such as museums, performances, concerts, etc. I propose using a proven model that already uses this three-legged stool approach, and has been tested for nearly 30 years: The National A+ Schools Program.

A+ SCHOOLS

The National A+ Schools Program is a research-based reform strategy for whole school transformation that began in North Carolina in 1995 and has grown to reach schools in other states as well as South Africa and Switzerland. The A+ Schools program believes that the arts are fundamental to teaching and learning. The curriculum is collaborative and taught through multi-disciplinary integration; it functions both as arts integrated into core content and core content integrated into arts content classes.³

The transformation model is designed as a three-year implementation process and requires the commitment of the entire school, including administration and operations. The model involves summer intensive training, professional development throughout the year, and bi-annual A+ Leadership Meetings for administrators and coordinators. As an A+ School, daily instruction looks vastly different from other school models. For example, in a lesson where students were learning about the Sistine Chapel, a picture worksheet was attached underneath the desks and students became young Michelangelos, lying underneath the desks, painting their own work (NCArts, 2022). In this manner, students are not just learning facts about history, they are engaged in it. To illustrate how multi-disciplinary the instruction can be, science classes can learn about forces in motion through dance while dance classes learn about the science of forces in motion (NCArts, 2022). Consciously or not, the A+ School model connects with Goldberg’s three-legged stool concept:

³ A more in-depth history of the National A+ Schools Program can be accessed in this [A+ Schools timeline](#).

1. Arts Instruction: Students of an A+ School participate in arts classes.
2. Arts Processes/Arts Integration: Core content teachers are infusing arts processes and skills into their content lessons and providing students with various ways to learn and understand the material.
3. Arts Experiences: Teaching and professional artists come into the school to expose students to artistic fields and professions. Additionally, students are able to experience the arts on school field trips to museums, galleries, and performances.

Being research-based, the A+ Schools model has hard and soft data showing the positive impact of arts integration. A study by Thomas & Arnold (2011) found that when it comes to academics, students in A+ Schools performed at comparable rates to students in public schools, suggesting the additional time spent in arts competencies did not take away from core content learning. However, a case study conducted by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2014) found more positive impacts of the A+ Schools model at three schools in North Carolina: students developed individual strengths and intelligences, gained critical job skills, and took ownership over their work. A teacher at Bugg Elementary (one of the schools involved in the case study) reported:

I feel like our school is committed to A+. I love seeing students who often have behavior issues in a regular classroom setting thrive when using their “body smarts.” I think that the essence of A+ is celebrating the differences in people. Those differences are not focused on socioeconomic status or intelligence; rather they focus on the differences in learning styles. No one is deemed stupid or unable to learn—instead they are celebrated for having different styles and challenged by other people’s styles (as cited in North Carolina Department of Cultural Resource and North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014, p. 8).

The principal at Bugg Elementary commented on the improvement in test scores: “Our test scores go up by pouring on the arts. We doubled the specials last year and our scores went up 14% with the most growth

in math and science” (as cited in North Carolina Department of Cultural Resource and North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014, p. 15). Throughout the case study, teachers champion the use of diverse learning pathways and the academic results they are seeing in their students. The teachers have noticed their students independently making connections between the core content and arts content as well. The A+ model connects to Wiggins and McTighe’s (2005) six facets of understanding, referenced earlier. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) identified that students have a mature understanding of a given topic when they can explain, interpret, apply, and empathize, as well as have perspective and self-knowledge. Expressing knowledge through the arts demands a robust understanding beyond simple recitation of rote facts; interpretation, perspective, and empathy are hallmarks of the arts, and the iterative creative process demands constant exploration on a topic. Through the use of artistic processes, students are naturally utilizing all six facets and teachers are better able to assess the level of understanding in their classrooms.

EDUCATING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY AND BEYOND

Moses Goldberg (2006) posits that we have to decide if we are educating students for the world we live in today, or if we are educating students for an unknown future. This affects the decision of arts in education. If we choose to educate students for a future we do not know, arts integration would assist by offering outlets for critical thinking, innovation and creativity (p. 23). Arts integration has been practiced, studied and theorized for decades and there is an extensive amount of research outlining its benefits over time. As mentioned in the research put together by the Arts Education Partnership (2017), the arts support the development of what is referred to as deeper learning skills. Deeper learning skills, as outlined by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (2013), include:

1. master core academic content
2. think critically and solve complex problems
3. work collaboratively
4. communicate effectively
5. learn how to learn
6. develop academic mindsets

These deeper learning skills relate to Wiggins and McTighe's six facets of understanding and also connect to the job skills employers look for in college graduates. A recent *Forbes* article highlighted the in-demand skills needed for jobs in 2030 including critical thinking and analysis, creative thinking, emotional intelligence, and lifelong learning (Marr, 2023). In other words, a robust arts integrated education reform would help students succeed in future careers and in life, not just academically in the here and now.

David C. Banks says he wants to change the reading curriculum and start a "massive turnaround" for New York City students, but a new reading curriculum alone will not create a "massive turnaround." Rather, Banks should call for a new pedagogical approach in New York City schools and mandate the use of arts integration in every New York City public school. By infusing the arts into core curriculum, Banks could aid in increasing literacy skills, advancing math skills, helping students develop critical thinking, improving school culture, and so much more. While it is daunting to take on such a task, it can be done by using the National A+ Schools Program model. The National A+ Schools Program model has longevity and proven effectiveness in schools on a global scale and could be readily implemented in New York City schools. With the introduction of arts integration, students will gain a multidimensional understanding of the topics they learn in school and teachers will reach the diverse learners in their classrooms. Furthermore, exposure to the infinite creative process will develop a student's lifelong academic appetite. With arts integration, students will graduate with transferable and lifelong skills needed to take on the future. Arts integration is the massive turnaround that New York City so desperately needs to radically transform its educational outcomes. Students and teachers deserve better, and it's within our grasp.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Connolly, E. (2023). Arts integration: A proposal for transformative education reform and critical pedagogy in New York City Public Schools. *ArtsPraxis*, 10 (2), pp. 66-78.

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