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Increasing Student Learning through Arts Integration

An Action Research Report

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Increasing Student Learning through Arts Integration

Submitted on November 20,2016

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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St. Paul, Minnesota

Advisor: _____

Date: _____

Abstract

This action research study was designed to examine the effects of the arts integration on student learning. Student learning was broken down by focusing on student engagement, critical thinking, and creative response. Research was conducted with 72 participants from fourth grade, fifth grade, and ninth grade classrooms within the social studies curriculum. Data collection methods included a pre-assessment survey, student journal prompts, observation tally sheets, student self-assessments, and the post-assessment survey. The results of our study indicated that student learning in each classroom maintained or improved when the arts were integrated. Students showed enthusiasm and felt optimistic towards integrating the arts into their learning. According to our student survey many students noted an increase in their critical thinking skills and explained that the arts helped them display their knowledge and creativity. However, in the future we would guide students to be more specific in their journal responses to better communicate their ideas. As a result of our study, we have committed to improving student learning by continuing to integrate the arts into the curriculum.

Keywords: arts integration, student learning, student engagement, critical thinking, creative response

Imagine a classroom filled with children eager to learn. Detailed paintings line the classroom walls as students use the images to recite their poetry. Music plays in the background while students dance to new genres and short stories are used to creatively introduce new topics of study. Teachers are continually analyzing new methods to improve quality instruction that generate high levels of student achievement. Incorporating arts into the curriculum can provide students with a deeper understanding and desire to learn. The arts can create a culture that values critical reflection and innovative approaches to teaching and learning while fostering a strong sense of community among faculty, staff, students (Garrett, 2013).

This action research study took place in fourth grade, fifth grade, and ninth grade classrooms with ages ranging from nine to fifteen with a total of 72 students. The fourth grade classroom was composed of 26 students ages nine to ten years old. There were thirteen males and thirteen females from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds. Out of the 26 students, 24 were Caucasian, one was Hispanic, and one was Native American. Two students worked with a Levels of Service teacher due to high reading and math scores, two students received reading services due to low reading scores, and two students were on an Individual Education Program (IEP). The remaining twenty students did not receive any services.

The fifth grade classroom was composed of 24 students. In this class, there were fourteen boys and ten girls ages ten to eleven years old. This class consisted of students with various ethnicities: twenty Caucasian, two Native American, one Polynesian, and one African American. The socioeconomic status in this class ranges from middle to high. One student is on an IEP for reading and math, while one student is on a 504 plan. There were two students who are in the Levels of Service program and two students see reading specialists. The remaining eighteen students do not receive services.

The last group was a classroom of 22 ninth graders ages fourteen to fifteen. There were twelve males and ten females. Out of the 22 students, there were twenty Caucasian, one Native American, and one African American. All students came from middle to high socioeconomic families. At the high school they no longer offer Levels of Service for high performing students, instead students that are advanced in math and English are able to take courses beyond their grade level. Academically, eight of the 22 students were enrolled in advanced math classes, two students were on 504 plans, one student was on an IEP, and one was on an ILP (Individual Language Plan).

The combined classrooms included students with varying academic abilities and eagerness to learn. A small number of our students fully engage in daily lessons, think critically on a consistent basis, and express themselves by showcasing their creativity. However, most students struggle with these skills. The purpose of this research was to study the effects of arts integration on student achievement and use the results to improve student skills and the outcome of student learning.

After looking at the relationship between arts integration and student learning, we have developed our action research question. Will six weeks of arts integration in the classroom have an effect on student achievement through engagement, critical thinking, and creative response?

Literature Review

From science lab reports, analyzing Macbeth, plotting functions on graphing paper to incorporating the music into the protest era of the Vietnam War, arts integration in the classroom plays a major role in increasing student achievement (Pogrebin, 2007). Arts integration as described by Parsons (2004):

is centered on using arts techniques and activities to teach non-arts subjects, or integrating other subjects into the arts teacher's curriculum. It also includes the study of popular visual culture, which is intrinsically interdisciplinary, since it helps students to fluidly make connections between their lived experience with the popular visual world, the fine arts, language, and ideologies (as cited in Pennisi, 2012, p.104).

Arts integration is of particular importance to many educators as it is a crucial factor in fostering and increasing student engagement, critical thinking skills, and creative response. By incorporating arts into the curriculum, it can create a culture that values critical reflection and innovative approaches to teaching and learning while fostering a strong sense of community among faculty, staff, students (Garrett, 2013). This literature review addressed the effects of budget cuts on fine arts programs in school districts across the country and art integration's ability to positively impact student learning and their experiences.

Budget Cuts in Schools Eliminate the Arts

The financial strain on districts across the country has forced districts to institute budget cuts in their schools. Often the arts and humanities programs get cut first as they are not viewed as parts of the core curricular content. Spohn (2008) investigated the condition of a public school's arts education program under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the teachers' perspective in regards to changes to the program. Through data collection and teacher interviews, it was revealed that administrative decisions were made to improve test scores in math and reading to accommodate NCLB. Under NCLB and its mandates, monetary challenges exist for arts education programs (Spohn, 2008). As is the case in other districts around the nation, a Philadelphia School District implemented a round of budget cuts, and the music and arts programs were in jeopardy once again (University Wire, 2014). University Wire (2014)

shared that some studies have shown music to be an effective way to enhance cognitive abilities and the developmental growth of a child, the school district still decided on cuts to these programs. Music not only in the Philadelphia School District, but across the world gives students a sense of hope and belonging in a rapidly changing society (University Wire, 2014).

Likewise, Campbell (2001) argues the same point on decisions to cut arts and music programs. He states that most rural school districts tend to be consistently less wealthy than urban or suburban school districts and eliminate programs that are deemed non-essential. As seen in the urban Philadelphia School District, rural districts often cut arts and music programs and deny students an education in these areas (Campbell, 2001). Additionally, Burrack, Payne, Bazan, and Hellman (2014) discuss the risk imposed on students' educational experience when these budget cuts are made to music programs. Their analysis concluded "that the risk posed in squeezing opportunities for music education through staffing and budgetary reductions is increasing. Staffing reductions will likely result in increased workloads for remaining staff, possibly reducing education experiences for students" (Burrack et al., 2014, p.40). Furthermore, when schools are forced to reduce their spending by making cuts to programs such as arts and music, students are affected most as they lose out on opportunities to learn from these experiences.

Arts Integration Increases Student Engagement

The Glossary of Education Reform (2016) defines student engagement as the "degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education." Pogrebin (2007) discusses integrating arts into the classroom, and how it not only increases student engagement but improves critical thinking and increases academic achievement

as well. Educators of arts integration programs focus on the benefits of classes in painting, drawing, sculpture and the other visual arts (Pogrebin, 2007). A faculty learning community program at Oklahoma City University focused on improving teaching and learning through integrating arts in a variety of different disciplines (Garrett, 2013). According to Garrett (2013), rather than an emphasis on the memorization of facts, students were encouraged to practice higher level learning by creating presentations and creative projects in their core subject areas. He states that instead of writing a conventional research paper, students created pieces of arts and then wrote critically reflective responses about the arts in their papers (Garrett, 2013). Students recognized the effectiveness of the active and creative learning environments and appreciated pedagogical changes that increased their learning experiences (Garrett, 2013). Furthermore, Bauerlein (2010) states that even though arts have many benefits in the classroom, if teachers cannot prove that their students are learning the desired curriculum, and students are not meeting state or district expectations, then districts will lose funding and hours. This loss of financing can be seen most often in classrooms of low-income, minority, and at-risk students. According to Garrett (2013), when the arts are integrated into the classroom, it creates a stronger sense of community, creativity, and engagement.

Arts Integration Increases Critical Thinking

Pennisi (2012) states that integrating the arts into non-arts based classes provides students with an enriched and valuable learning experience. He argues that it allows students to experience works of arts as catalysis for imagination and to think critically about the class's learning objective (Pennisi, 2012). Arts integration provides opportunities for students to experience inquiry and critically analyze artwork while challenging their own world (Pennisi, 2012). Student work such as presentations and creative projects give students the chance to

demonstrate their abilities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate (Garrett, 2013). Additionally, Huye (2015) agrees that visual and literary arts that are woven into the curriculum increase student critical thinking. He argues that when students are exposed to the arts their reflection on learning reveals higher level thinking skills as they are able to evaluate and connect content to real-world issues (Huye, 2015). Similarly, Pogrebin (2007) claims “Students who study the arts seriously are taught to see better, to envision, to persist, to be playful and learn from mistakes, to make critical judgments and justify such judgments”(p.7). Furthermore, a study conducted by Bowen, Freene, and Kisida (2014) revealed similar findings. Two groups of students were created, one treatment group and one control group. The treatment group was awarded a museum tour where trained guides exposed the students to arts and asked critical thinking questions based on the art-work. The control group did not go on the museum tour and was not exposed to the inquiry session. Several weeks after the museum visit, trained members of the research team conducted a student survey and critical thinking exercise with students of both groups. Their findings revealed that students in the treatment group used more critical thinking strategies when writing and analyzing unfamiliar pieces of arts compared to those in the control group (Bowen et al., 2014). These strategies included moving beyond mere observation through interpreting and evaluating the artwork. However, the study did not make connections to cross-curricular content outside of the art class, but rather focused on improving skills within that class only.

Arts Integration Increases Creative Response

Hanson and Herz (2011) explain that arts and creativity are linked together as arts can provide opportunities for students to be creative and express themselves. Hanson and Herz (2011) also point out that research shows how difficult teaching creativity can be and in order for

this to take place, arts needs to be thoughtfully structured to foster the creativity in each student. One way teachers can advance students creativity is by incorporating specific techniques or habits that can help people think in different ways (Hanson & Herz, 2011). Howard Gruber (1989, 1999) found that when people who have done creative work, either at some point or over time, commit time and resources to goals they have established, they organize aspects in their life to meet these goals (as cited in Hanson & Herz, 2011). Additionally, Zimmerman (2010), agrees and states that arts programs should focus on creative processes because there are many strategies that can help influence the students' creative development. Zimmerman (2010) also mentions that "teachers and students need to be risk-takers and allow bodies of work to evolve over time through self-directed learning because this is where true creative self-expression can be supported and valued" (p.89). Furthermore, Gullatt (2008) states that the arts can enhance learning and teaching for students and teachers alike. He also shared that students can be creative through the arts as they can acquire a feel for what it means to transform ideas, images, and even feelings (Gullatt, 2008). Educators should be aware that the arts can enhance the understanding of content areas which can assist with student learning (Gullatt, 2008).

Conclusion

Research shows that integrating arts in the classroom has played a vital role in student learning (Garrett, 2013). However due to budget cuts, the arts can sometimes be removed (Campbell, 2001). Burrack et al. (2014) states there is a risk to the student's educational experience when programs such as music are taken out. Garrett (2013) explains that incorporating creative presentations and projects can help construct a higher level of thinking. Critical thinking skills can also be increased when visual and literary arts are woven into the curriculum (Huye, 2015). The arts also provide opportunities for students to be creative and

express themselves, as arts and creativity are linked together (Hanson & Herz, 2011). Research has proven that arts integration across the curriculum has increased student achievement through student engagement, critical thinking, and creative response (Bowen, et al., 2014).

Methodology

The challenge of monitoring student learning through engagement, critical thinking, and creative response by integrating arts into the lessons required the use of quantitative and qualitative data tools. The process of observation and data collection took place throughout a six-week time period starting in the middle of September and concluding at the end of October. This study took place in fourth grade, fifth grade, and ninth grade classrooms with ages ranging from nine to fifteen, and totaling 72 students. The arts integrated lessons were implemented once a week in all three classrooms. Each lesson incorporated one of the following forms of the arts throughout the social studies curriculum: visual, literary, or music and dance. The data collection tools used to gather and process information included a student survey given before and after the research study, journal reflections, observation tally sheets, and student self-assessments given at the conclusion of each lesson.

Before the research was conducted, all parents were given a passive consent form. The consent form provided parents with a summary of the research, the purpose of the study and interventions or normal classroom lessons that would be conducted throughout the six-week time frame. All students were granted permission to participate in the study.

The lessons throughout the research process incorporated visual arts (drawing, painting, photography) into two lessons, literary arts (short stories and poetry) into two lessons and music and dance into two lessons. Students participated in the lessons just as they would in any other lesson.

Prior to the start of the first lesson, students took an arts integration survey via Google Forms. The survey consisted of five total questions; one open ended, two multiple choice, and two rating scale style questions. The purpose of the survey was to gain insight about student attitudes towards arts in the classroom, student perception of their ability to think critically, and what they feel keeps them engaged throughout a lesson. Upon the conclusion of the research students were asked to take the survey at the end of the sixth week. We then compared the results of the two surveys and were able to evaluate the progress made over the course of the study.

Secondly, at the conclusion of each lesson students reflected on their learning by responding to a series of journal prompts. They were each asked to think about the objective of the lesson, the activity aligned with the lesson, and their learning as a result of the lesson. The journal prompts guided students to think about and respond to the following: how arts made them feel, how integrating arts into the lesson has or hasn't helped to improve their learning or understanding of the topic, and finally, students were asked to explain any concepts they still might be struggling to understand. The journal responses were recorded in a notebook and collected and reviewed at the conclusion of each lesson.

In addition to the student survey and journal responses, teacher observation was an essential component of our data collection and was used throughout the entire research process. We used a tally sheet system to track student behavior throughout our observations. At the top of each tally sheet we noted the time and date of the observation and the title of each lesson to organize our data. This system was used to observe and record data for the three lowest achieving students in each of our classrooms. Observation marks were taken for one arts-integrated lesson per week during the six-week research period.

There were three different sections of observation on our tally sheet. Our first section was “critical thinking.” We used this area to record the number of times students used skills such as evaluating, inferring, and explaining. The next section was “creative response” which would consist of students showcasing their unique style. Our third section of observation was “student engagement.” This would include students actively participating in the lesson by staying on task, collaborating, and responding to their peers/teacher.

Finally, the last data tool we utilized in our action research study was the student self-assessment taken at the conclusion of each arts integrated lesson via Google Forms. The self-assessment allowed the students to evaluate the lesson’s effectiveness on engagement, critical thinking, and creativity. Although students reflect on their learning through written journal entries, the self-assessment is used as a concrete evaluation of the lesson. In addition, the journal reflection and the self-assessment tools helped the researchers reflect on the lessons and adjust future lesson plans according to the information revealed in these two data tools.

The questions within the self-assessment included a varied format similar to the student survey. In short answer form, students were asked to explain what they felt was the most engaging aspect of the lesson. The responses to this particular question informed our instruction and allowed us to zero in on the most effective methods of delivering information to students. The remaining questions were based off of a rating scale. Statements presented centered on the student’s level of focus throughout the lesson and their interest level in the content presented. Student ability to stay focused was a crucial component as it could affect achievement scores. Furthermore, making sure the material presented was relevant and interesting could perhaps play an essential role in retaining information.

Question four of the self-assessment dealt with making connections through arts. Making relevant connections between the content and the student can play an important role in their critical thinking skills as they are able to evaluate and connect content to real-world issues (Huye, 2015). In this self-assessment students evaluate the level of connection made between the arts integrated lesson and outside content.

Lastly, students rated their level of participation throughout the lesson. If students take the initiative to participate by engaging in conversation and asking questions for deeper understanding, they may see an increase their academic achievement (Garrett, 2013). By rating themselves on their participation and collaboration with peers, it allowed the students to reflect on their current achievement level and make adjustments if they needed to.

The last question of the self-assessment focused on student creativity. Based on the lesson, students were asked to rate their ability to be creative during the lesson. Being able to express knowledge through a creative approach plays a role in student learning (Gullatt, 2008).

Analysis of Data

The purpose of our study was to investigate the effects of arts integration on student learning in elementary and high school classrooms. We measured student learning by analyzing data tools that focused on student engagement, critical thinking skills, and creative response. Our data tools included: a pre-assessment survey, journal reflections, observation tally sheets, and student self-assessments. The pre-assessment survey was the first set of data collected and analyzed. This survey was given to all students in each of the grade levels and was used to gain knowledge about student engagement, their attitudes towards integrating arts into their learning and perception of their critical thinking ability. The students were able to answer questions truthfully because of the anonymity of the electronic style survey, giving us the most consistent

results possible. Additionally, students were directed to provide one response per question. The category “other” includes comments such as: group activities, effective teacher, technology, and stories. The results of the survey were analyzed by question and grade level and were combined into a graph to show the comparisons among the different grades. The first question of the pre-assessment asked students what helps them to stay engaged while learning.

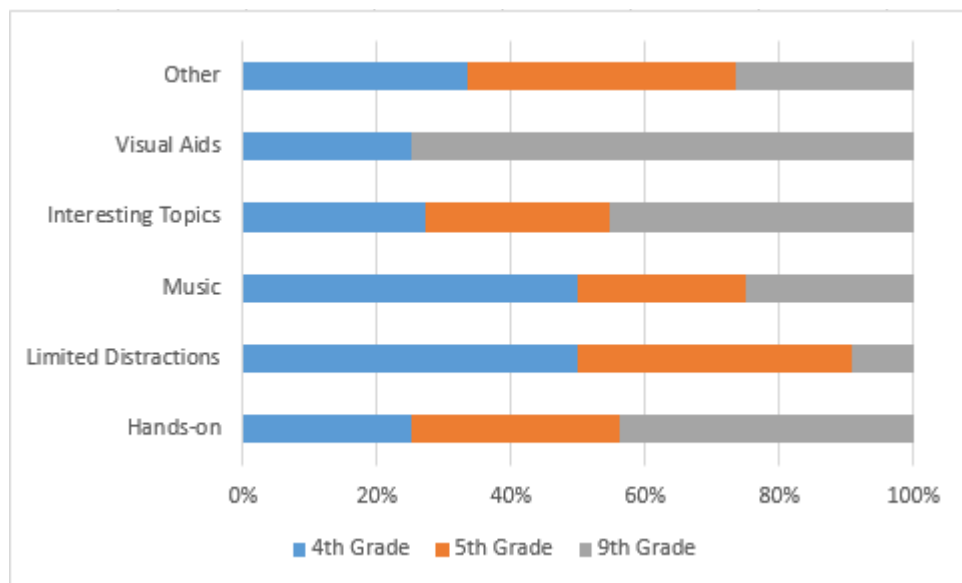


Figure 1. Pre-assessment survey results to the question, “what helps you to stay engaged in what you are learning?” The results were from three classrooms and compiled into like categories.

As shown by Figure 1, our students at the elementary level were most engaged in their learning when there were limited distractions present. At the high school level, students reported being most engaged when exposed to hands-on activities in the classroom. This data was helpful in the preparation and planning process, because it allowed us gain insight on the different learning styles and build our lesson plans around student engagement.

Secondly, students were asked, based on a rating scale, how they felt about integrating the arts into the classroom. This question was an important factor to our study because it gave us a sense of how students felt about learning through the arts. According to Figure 2, there were only two students who rated this question at a two or lower. The rating scale ranged from 1-5

with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The graph also shows that the majority of our students felt positive about integrating arts into the classroom which was very motivating for us as we began this study.

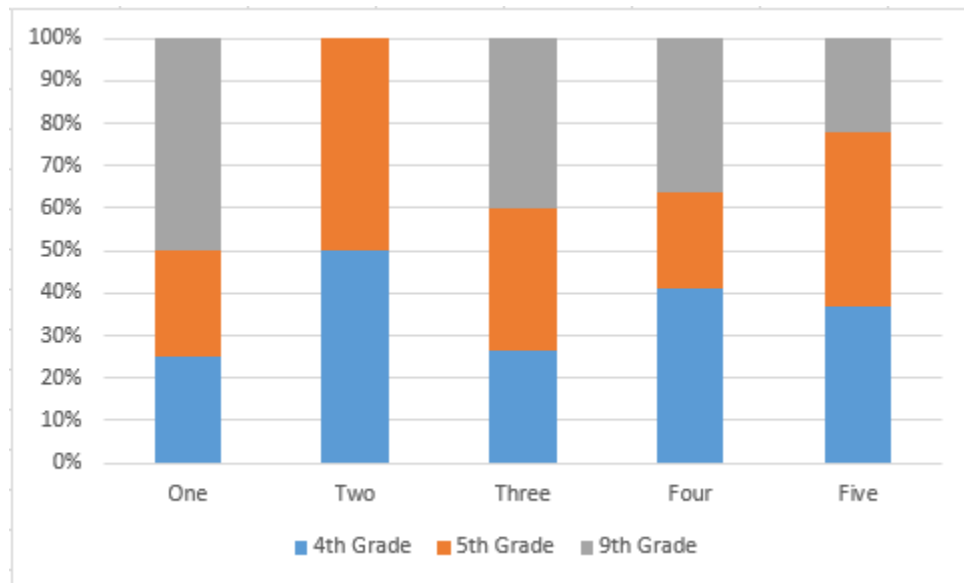


Figure 2. Pre-assessment survey results for the question how do you feel about integrating the arts into your learning. One stands for strongly disagree, two: disagree, three: neutral, four: agree, and five: strongly agree.

Additionally, our third question assessed different forms of art that would best spark their creativity. These art forms included: music/dance, literature (short stories/poems), visual arts (paintings, pictures, sculptures), or they had the option of choosing none. The results of this survey are shown below in Figure 3.

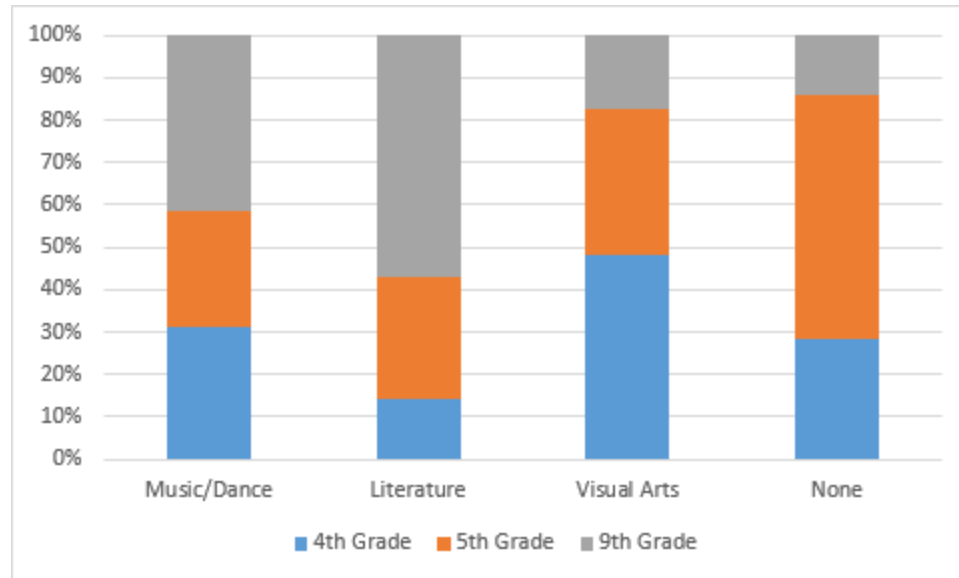


Figure 3. Pre-assessment survey results for the question, which of the following forms of art do you feel best sparks your creativity? Students were given the four choices and were to choose one.

This information was helpful as it allowed us to become more familiar with the form of art students felt they could be creative with. From there we used this information to help assist with lesson planning.

Next, students were asked based on a yes or no answer if they thought the arts could improve their creativity. The information that arose from this question was not overly surprising. The results showed us almost all of the students believed that integrating arts into the classroom could assist their creativity. This data revealed that students recognize the potential impact that the arts have to further their learning and capacity to be creative.

Lastly, our final question on our pre-assessment survey asked students to rate their critical thinking skills. Students rated themselves on a rating scale as shown in Figure 4.

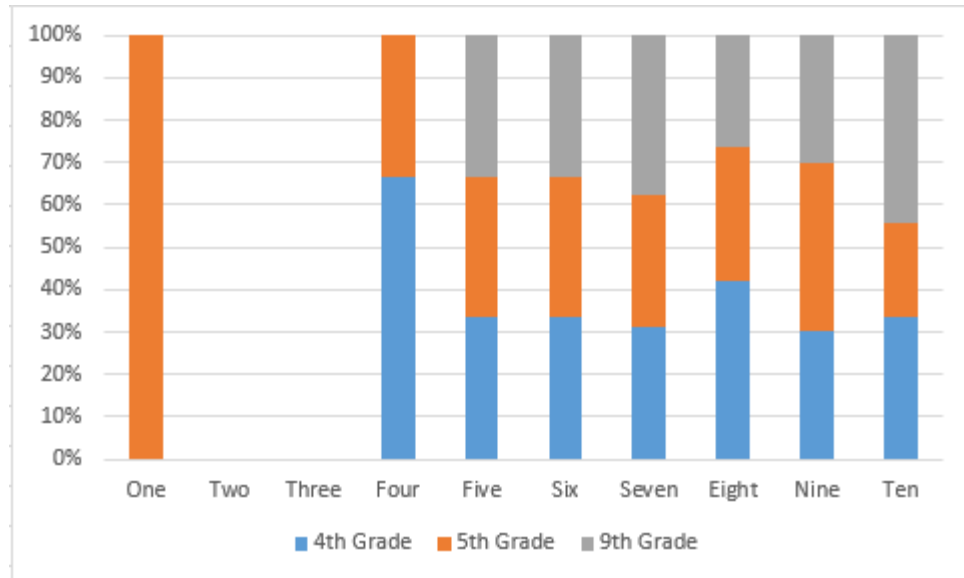


Figure 4. Pre-assessment survey results for the question, on a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your critical thinking skills? One represents poor and ten represents excellent.

The information reported shows that several students rated themselves as having moderate to higher level critical thinking skills. A high concentration of students reported scores of seven and eight. There was no real definitive pattern revealed between elementary and high school students, but the data shown states that most students believe they possess critical thinking skills, but have room for growth.

As we began to implement arts-integrated lessons into the classroom we had students journal at the conclusion of each lesson. We conducted two lessons that integrated visual arts, two literary arts, and two music and dance lessons for a total of six lessons. Students were asked to read each prompt and reflect with a written response. Although we had a variety of answers we compiled the reflections into like categories for each individual prompt. The first journal prompt asked students to reflect on how arts made them feel during the lesson. Figure 5 below illustrates the student results for the first prompt.

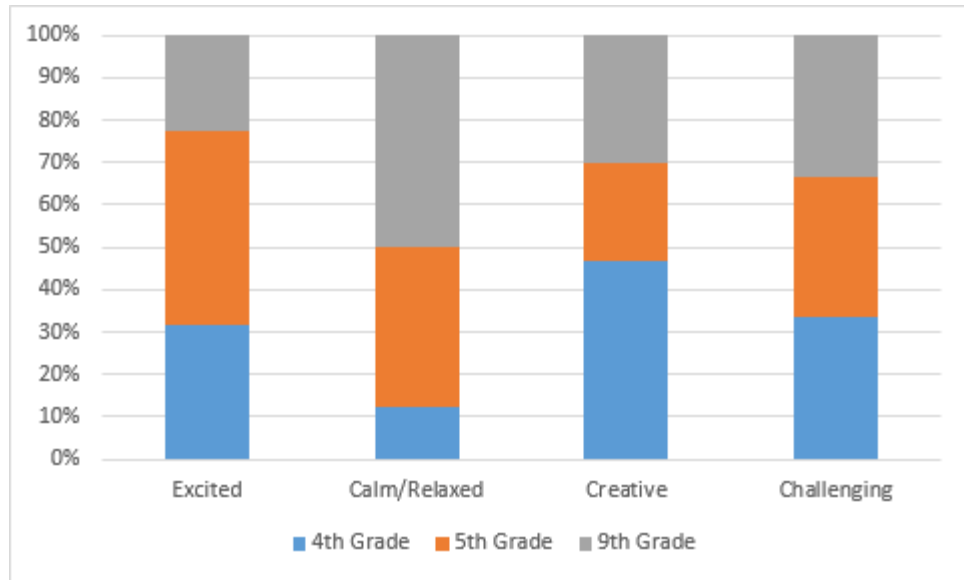


Figure 5. Students reflected in their journal about how the arts makes them feel. The results were combined into four common themes.

The graph and results to this journal prompt reveal a few key findings from the arts integrated lessons. The majority of students across all three grades reported feeling creative and excited about what they were learning with the content. Also, four students in each class felt challenged when the arts were woven into the curriculum which indicated the arts were causing them to think more critically about their work. This data was meaningful and concluded that students as a whole felt positive their learning experience.

Secondly, students were prompted to reflect on how integrating the arts helped them with each lesson. This would give us a better sense on how each type of art assisted with the understanding of the content and lesson.

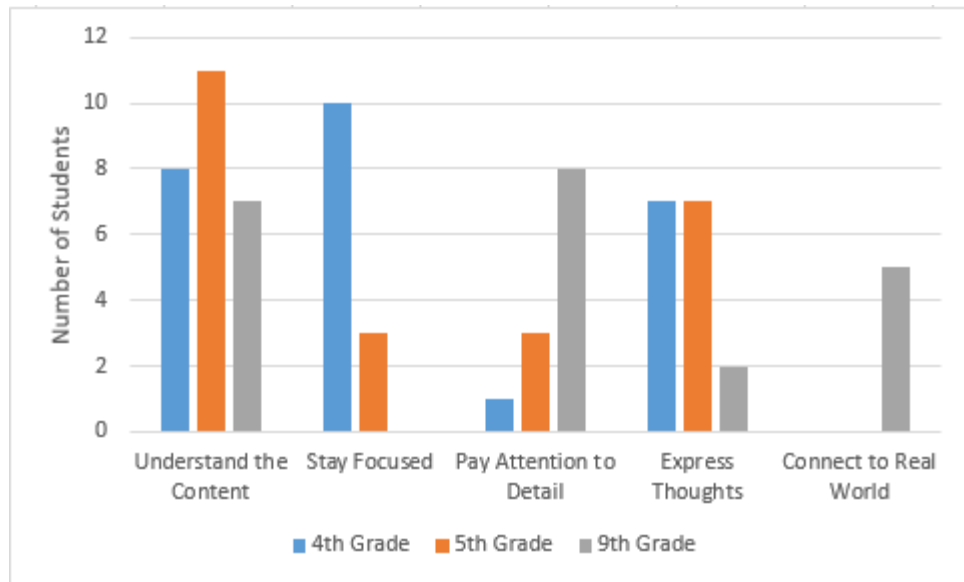


Figure 6. Students wrote responses to how integrating the arts into each lesson has helped them. Each response was analyzed and put into alike categories.

The results for the second journal prompt are shown above in Figure 6. The difference in grade level responses were apparent to us with this set of data. Many of the responses from the ninth grade students were more detailed and insightful than the responses from the fourth and fifth grade students. In particular, paying attention to detail and making connections to the real world were common responses for the ninth grade students that weren't mentioned much or at all from the elementary students. Overall, understanding the content was a common response as most students felt that integrating the arts into each lesson gave them a better understanding of the content.

Our last journal prompt asked the students to explain what they still struggled with even though the arts were incorporated into the lesson. Analyzing what our students felt they could improve on was a great way for us to better understand our teaching strategies while emphasizing methods to assist their weaknesses.

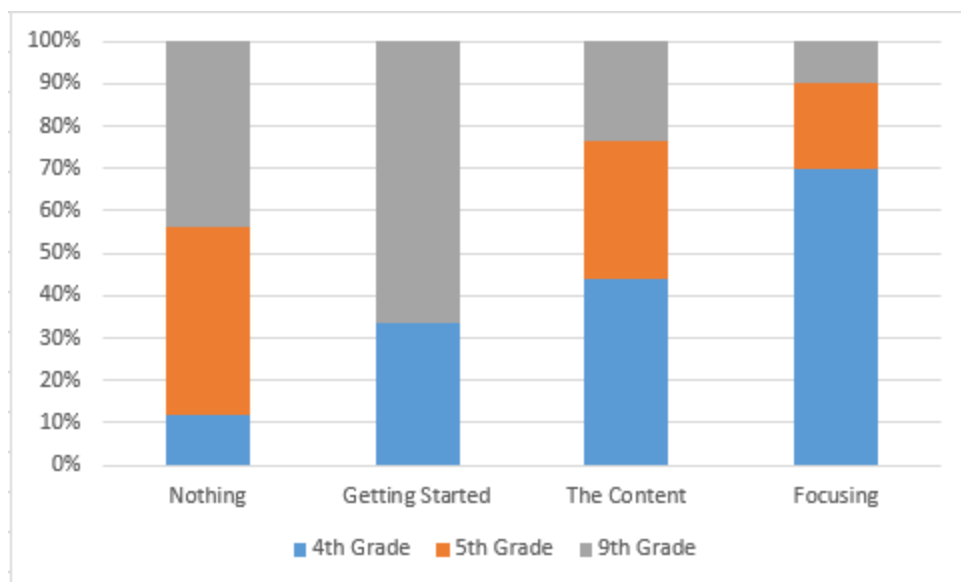


Figure 7. Students reflected on what they still are struggling with after an arts integrated lesson was taught. The responses were put together in like categories.

As shown in Figure 7, most of the students responded that they still struggle with the general content of the lesson. This general content differed from each of our lessons. Most students named a personal struggle that they had, such as understanding the basic details of a history lesson or the writing process that went along with a poetry lesson. This information was somewhat contradictory to the previous journal prompt which lead us to believe that students may have not interpreted the prompt correctly. There were some students however who simply answered “nothing.” Although this wasn’t necessarily the answer we were looking for, the students were being honest with what they thought at the time.

In addition to the student journals, we took observation notes using a tally sheet and recorded behaviors on the three lowest achieving students in each grade level classroom. These observations were conducted throughout all six arts-integrated lessons. We chose to observe these three students because it was logistically more feasible to gather meaningful data on a small target group versus trying to observe an entire class. We collected our data at the beginning, middle, and end of each lesson. The criteria included on our tally sheet included how

many times a student exhibited: critical thinking (using skills such as evaluating, inferencing, and explaining), creative response (students showcase their unique style in this lesson), and engagement (students are actively participating- staying on task, collaborating, responding to peers/teacher). We averaged the number of tallies per student throughout all six lessons. Figure 8 below details the results from the fourth grade classroom.

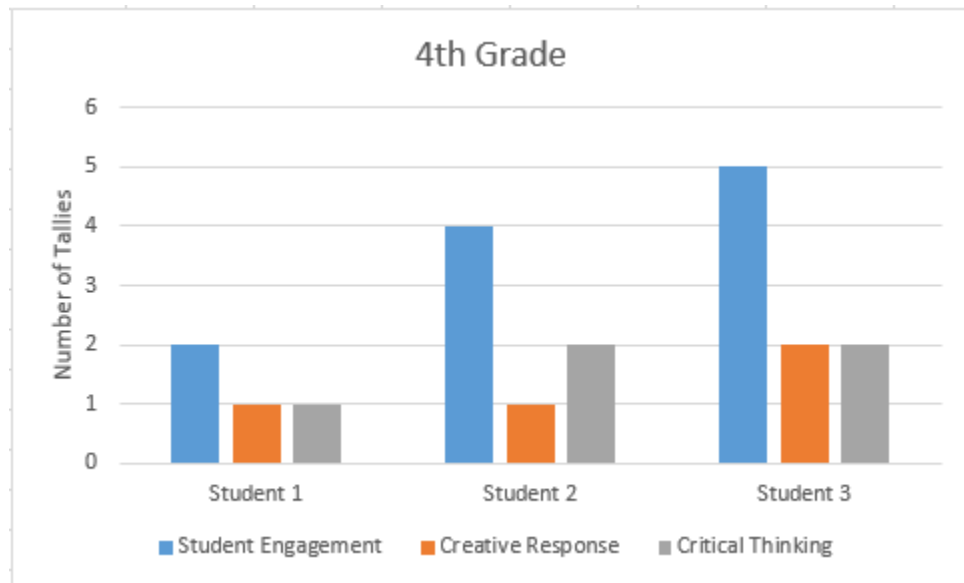


Figure 8. Three fourth grade students were observed based off of a three category observational tally sheet.

As shown in Figure 8, each of the three students observed were engaged in the arts-integrated lesson while actively participating by staying on task, collaborating, and responding to their peers or the teacher. When looking at the creative response and critical thinking data, all three students observed were able to showcase their creative and unique style in this lesson at least once. It still seemed somewhat difficult for each of them to use their critical thinking skills by evaluating, inferencing, or explaining.

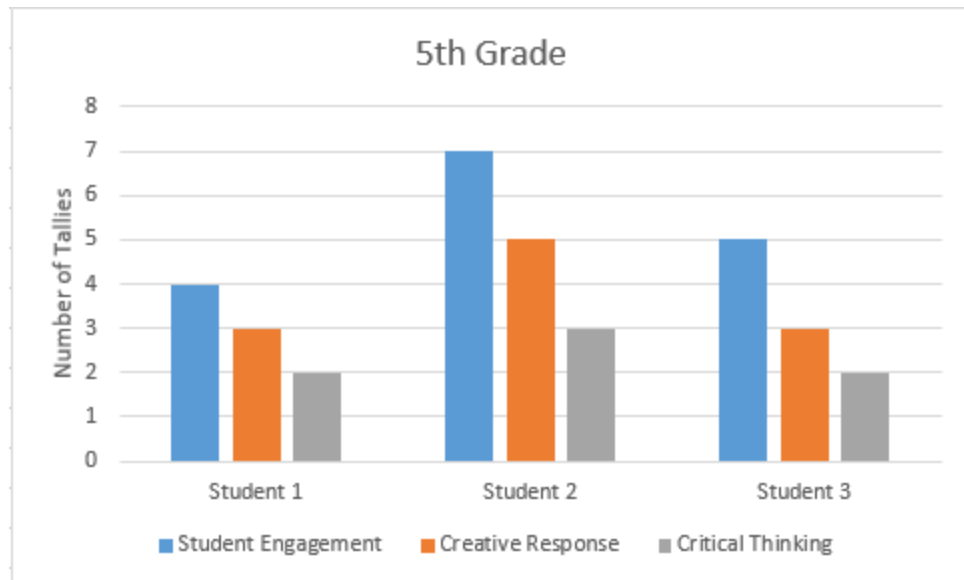


Figure 9. Three fifth grade students were observed based off of a three category observational tally sheet

Three fifth grade students were observed and the results are shown in Figure 9. Within these six arts integrated lessons, it was apparent that these students struggled with their critical thinking skills. They were able to showcase their creativity at times, but individually didn't compare to how they were able to stay engaged and actively participate in each of these lessons.

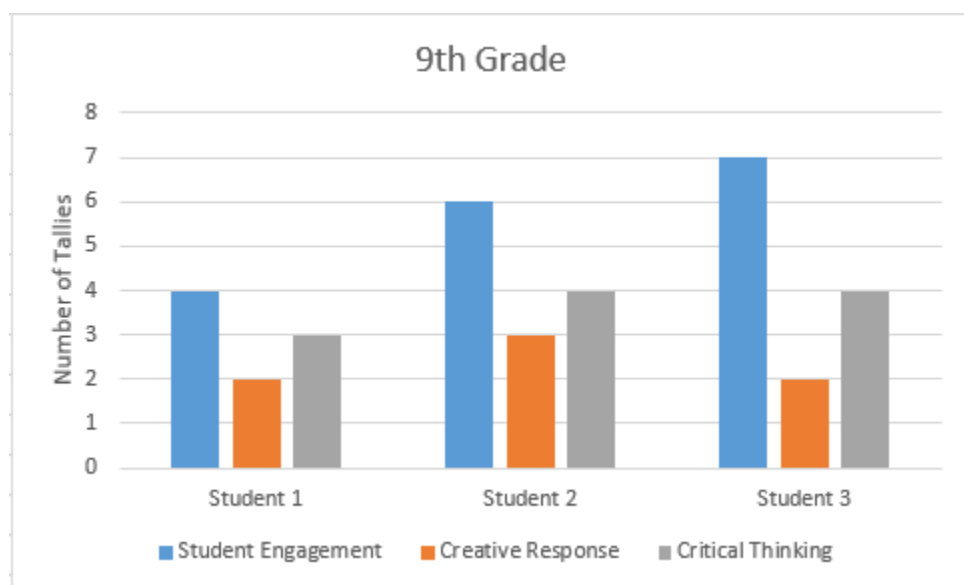


Figure 10. Three ninth grade students were observed based off of a three category observational tally sheet

As shown in Figure 10 above, the ninth grade students were strong in their ability to engage in the lessons when compared to the other categories. The arts-integrated lessons allowed students to easily stay on task while collaborating with one another. However, they seemed to struggle the most with showcasing their knowledge in a unique style. Student two had the highest tally marks with three average marks in that category. Lastly, students exhibited similar tally marks when it came to critical thinking. On average, all three students were given 3-4 marks by using evaluative, inferencing, and explanation skills.

This information was particularly helpful as it gave us insight on areas to continue to emphasize and work on with our students. At the elementary level the students observed exhibited lower critical thinking and creative response marks. However, at the high school level observations reported higher tally scores for these categories. Not surprisingly as students get older they are more apt to exhibit these skills more often. Students in all three grade levels scored the highest in their ability to engage in the lessons. This finding shows us that integrating arts into the curriculum enhances student achievement through engagement.

The third data tool used in our study was the student-self assessment. The self-assessment was given at the end of each arts-integrated lesson. Students answered a short answer question on what they felt was most engaging about the lesson. Additionally, students also answered a series of rating scale style questions that evaluated their performance and engagement throughout the lesson. We averaged the scores from the six arts-integrated lessons that were taught. Figure 11 below shows the results from the first question.

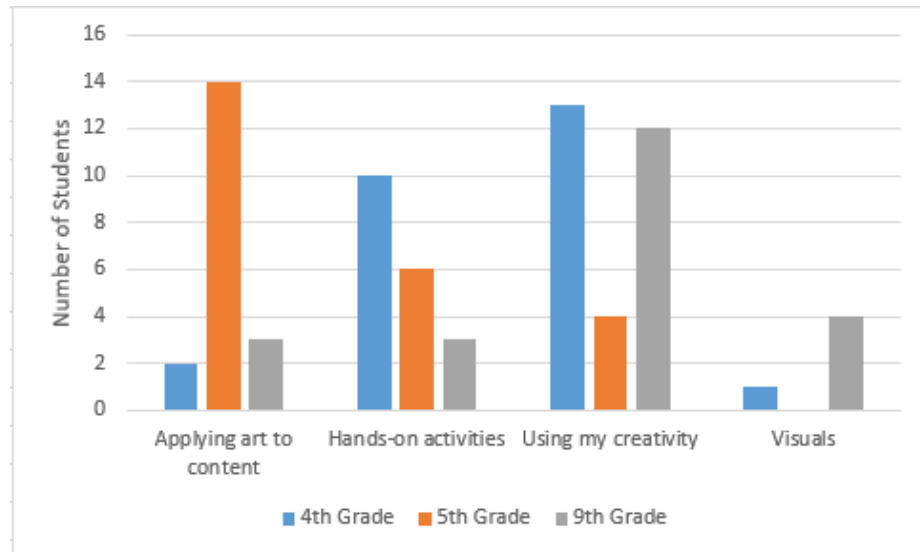


Figure 11. Students were asked what they felt was the most engaging about the lesson in a self-assessment that was given after each lesson. Results were compiled into like categories.

The results illustrate a high number of students that felt integrating the arts into the curriculum engaged them most because they were able to use their creative skills and apply the arts to the content they were learning about. Additionally, many also enjoyed the hands-on activities that went along with the lessons and the lowest reported category was the use of visuals throughout the lessons.

As illustrated below in Figure 12, a majority of the 4th grade students felt that the arts integrated lessons gave them an opportunity to use their creativity in a variety of ways. A majority of the students assessed also felt that they were interested in what they were learning in school and found it easy to stay focused while their teacher was presenting the lesson. It seemed that the students had a more difficult time making connections between the lesson and the real world. They also had some difficulty in asking questions and collaborating with their peers during the lesson. This assessment helped us better understand our students' perception on the lesson and make adjustments accordingly.

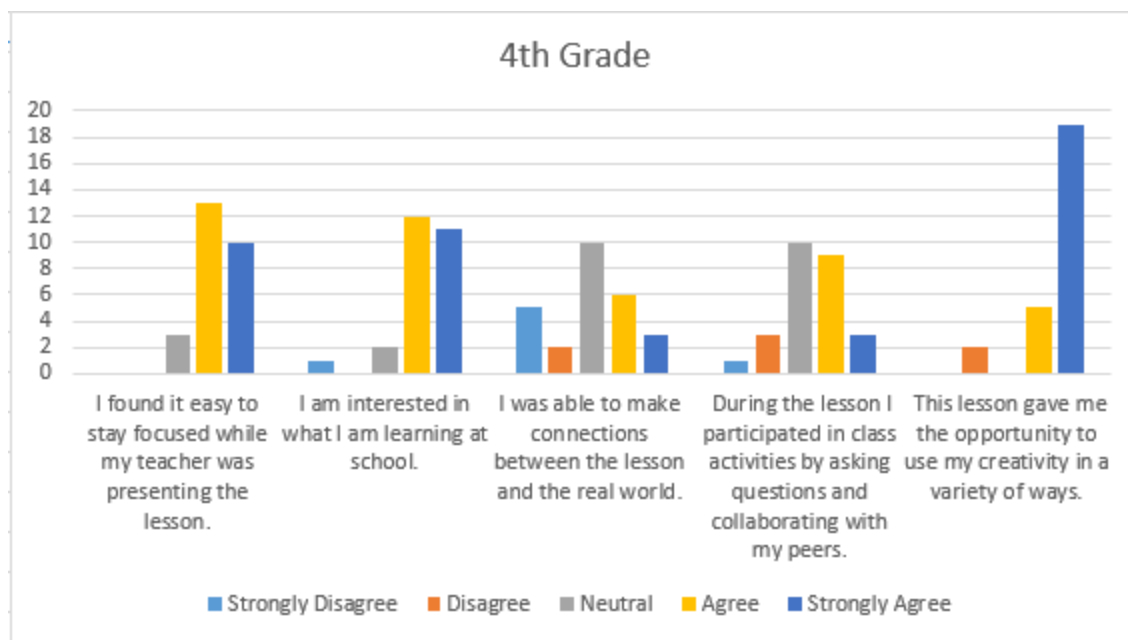


Figure 12. Fourth grade students were asked a series of questions given on a self-assessment, which was based on a rating scale of 1-5, one represents strongly disagree and 5 represents strongly agree.

The results from the fifth grade self-assessment are shown below in Figure 13. Analyzing the results from the fifth grade classroom show that majority of the students rated each lesson with a 3 or above, which fall from neutral to strongly agree. Making connections for most students is either easy to do or other students feel neutral about it. It was reassuring that a lot of the fifth grade students reported being able to stay focused during each lesson. Questioning and collaborating are areas where the fifth grade students could experience some more practice as those are skills that they can continue to use throughout the rest of their school years. This particular data tool is helpful as it can zero in on skills that students are comfortable and confident using as well as show areas where the students can gain some more knowledge and experience.

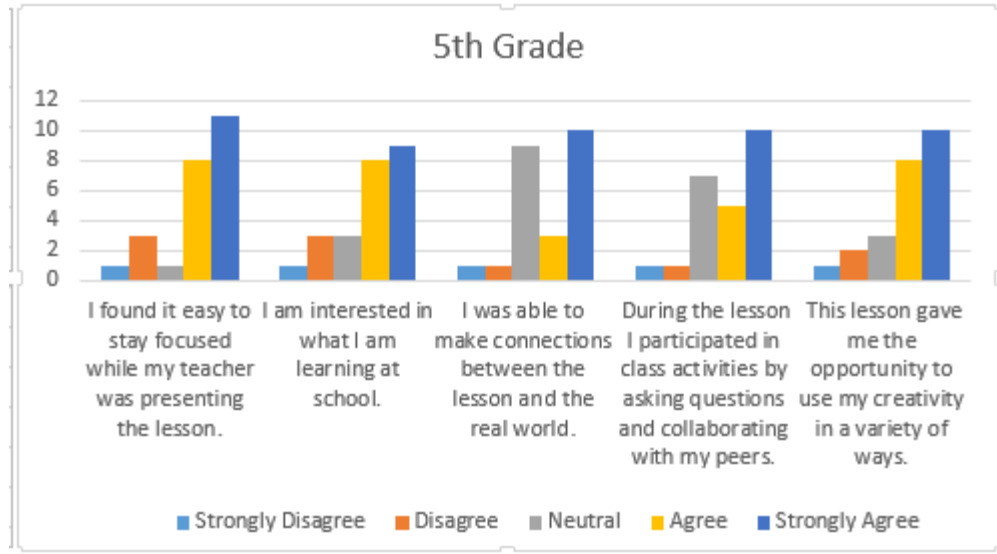


Figure 13. Fifth grade students were asked a series of questions given on a self-assessment, which was based on a rating scale of 1-5, one represents strongly disagree and 5 represents strongly agree.

Students in the ninth grade classroom reported feeling positive towards the arts integrated lessons throughout the study. A majority of students felt that the lessons gave them the opportunity to use their creativity skills and also revealed that it was easy for them to stay focused during the presentation of the material. The ninth grade students also found it easier to make connections between the lessons and the real world when compared to their fourth and fifth grade counterparts. Over half of the students also participated by asking questions and collaborating with their peers. Additionally, over half of the respondents reported being interested in what they were learning in school. This information was very informative and concludes that as students progress in school, they find the arts more valuable to their learning experience.

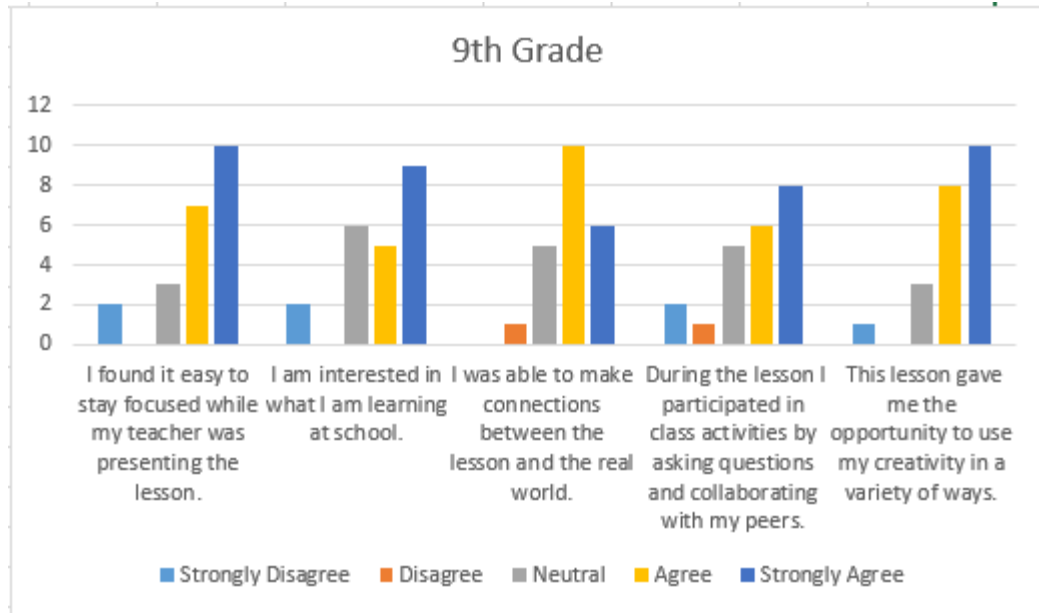


Figure 14. Ninth grade students were asked a series of questions given on a self-assessment, which was based on a rating scale of 1-5, one represents strongly disagree and 5 represents strongly agree.

To conclude our research we gave our students a post-assessment survey. The questions in this survey were the same questions we gave to students before we started our study. We compared the results of each of the questions with the original pre-assessment survey results. Figure 16 below illustrates the results for the first question dealing with student engagement.

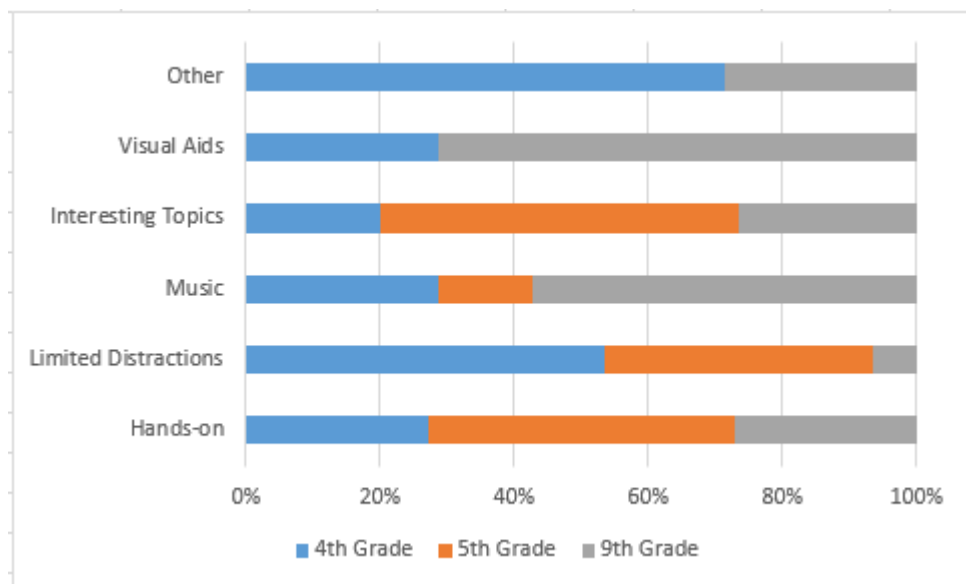


Figure 15. Post-assessment survey results to the question what helps you to stay engaged in what you are learning. The results were from three classrooms and compiled into the same like categories used from the pre-assessment survey.

In comparison to the original survey we saw a shift in what students felt helped them to stay engaged in their learning. At the elementary level students reported an increase in engagement through hands on activities and visual aids. Fewer students stated limited distractions helped them to focus, but instead they revealed a more specific category. At the secondary level, the ninth grade students shifted their feelings towards engagement in music and visual aids. Students throughout all three grade levels reported a more specific engagement and many no longer fit into the “other” category. This specific information told us that students thought more specifically about their learning and engagement connected to the arts integrated lessons we taught.

The second question asked students to rate how they felt about integrating the arts into their learning. The results for this question from the post-assessment survey are shown in Figure 16.

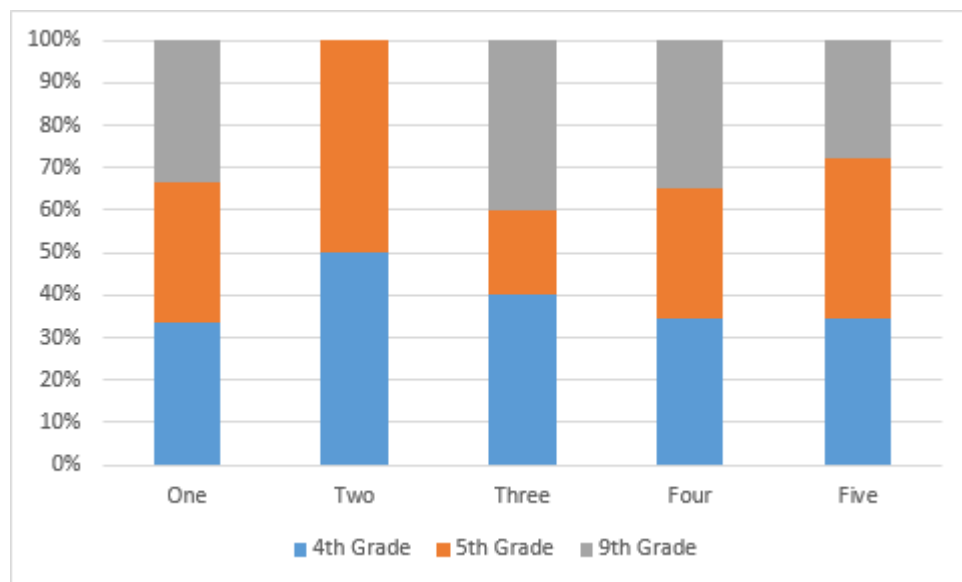


Figure 16. Post-assessment survey results for the question how do you feel about integrating the arts into your learning. One stands for strongly disagree, two: disagree, three: neutral, four: agree, and five: strongly agree.

When comparing these results with the pre-survey, fourth grade had the same results as those students didn't change their opinions about integrating arts into their learning. In the fifth grade classroom, there were more students who rated their feelings at a 4 than previously at the beginning of the study, which contributed to a lower number rated in the 3 category than the pre-survey is showing. The ninth grade students also had an increase in the 4 and 5 rating category. These results show us that the student's feelings changed slightly from the beginning of the study and that they enjoyed integrating the arts into their learning.

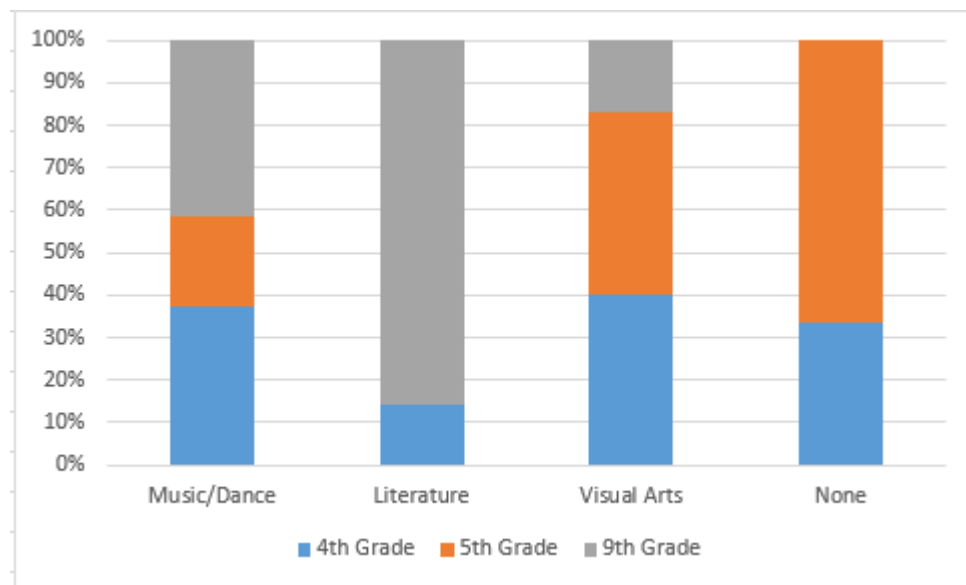


Figure 17. Post-assessment survey results for the question, which of the following forms of art do you feel best sparks your creativity? Students were given the four choices and were to choose one.

In Figure 17, students were asked what style of art they felt best sparks their creativity. The fourth grade students revealed the same results as the pre-survey. We saw an increase in visual arts as reported by our fifth and ninth grade students. Two of our surveyed students in the fifth grade classroom went from literature to a different category, whereas two students in the

ninth grade classroom shifted to literature. This information shows us that the arts integrated lessons have changed student feelings toward their creativity when integrating the arts.

The fourth question asked the students to reveal whether or not they believed that the arts could improve their creativity. These results did not change much at all from the pre-assessment survey. The fourth and fifth grade classrooms stayed the same. All of the ninth grade students stated ‘yes’, which was slightly different as there was one student who stated ‘no’ at the beginning. These post results, again, weren’t surprising as we figured that it would be very similar to the results from the pre-assessment survey.

The last question of the survey asked students to rate their ability to think critically as shown in Figure 18 below. A score of 1 on the rating scale represented “poor” and a score of 10 represented “excellent.” Overall, scores for each grade level increased slightly. Students no longer rated themselves at a one and we had several students shift up at least one number on the rating scale. The results from this survey show us that the arts integrated lessons have increased students’ ability to think critically.

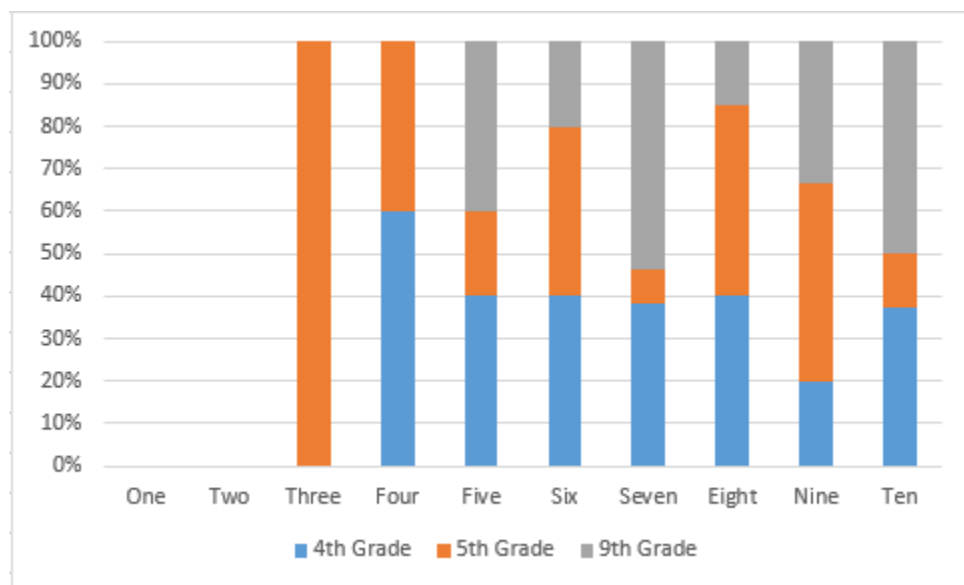


Figure 18. Post-assessment survey results for the question, on a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your critical thinking skills? One represents poor and ten represents excellent.

Action Plan

After reviewing the data from our research, the findings show that integrating the arts into the social studies curriculum had a positive effect on student learning through engagement, critical thinking, and creative response. As stated by Cooper (2011) the arts engage students and build on their work ethic as well as foster creativity and innovative thinking skills. When teachers spend time developing lessons centered on the arts, as done throughout the study, students are likely to feel excited about what they are learning, engage in the lessons by asking questions and collaborating with their peers, and develop skills to prepare themselves to be successful in the 21st century.

The analysis of data collected from this action research showed that students felt enthusiastic about integrating the arts into their learning and reported feeling confident that the arts could improve their ability to think critically. The observations we conducted throughout each arts integrated lesson confirms that students in each of the classrooms exhibited critical thinking skills during the activity and many felt their critical thinking skills improved when the arts were incorporated into their learning. Additionally, well over half of the students in each of the classrooms stated they found it easy to stay focused throughout the lessons presented by their teachers.

When it comes to expressing ideas and thoughts, a majority of the students reported that the lessons provided them with the opportunity to express their creativity in a variety of ways. This information was encouraging because a portion of our research focused on creative response. Moreover, when it comes to making changes within our teaching practices this is something we will take into consideration. We have concluded that the arts have created a positive learning experience for students by allowing them to express their knowledge in a

unique way. If teachers commit to providing their students with meaningful learning opportunities by integrating the arts, it could have a positive effect on their learning.

Additionally, students indicated that visual arts and music and dance were able to best spark their creativity. This is valuable information moving forward as we design and implement new lessons geared towards improving creativity skills.

Our study also revealed some conflicting information. As parts of the reflection process students were asked to respond to a series of journal prompts. Several students reported that the arts helped them better understand the content. On the other hand, several students also reported still struggling with the content even though the arts were incorporated into the lesson. In the future we would instruct students to be more specific in their response to the prompt in order to better understand the information they are trying to communicate.

The study also revealed that in comparing the elementary students to the high school students, the high school students were able to use the arts to make connections to the real world. We will commit to making meaningful connections to all students by modeling how to make connections between the arts and the curriculum more consistently.

Integrating the arts into the classroom impacted student learning positively based on the results from our research. Focusing on student engagement, critical thinking, and creative response was beneficial to our students by allowing them to participate in activities they weren't used to. Incorporating these skills gave our students the ability to grow as learners and challenged them to utilize what they learned. The arts also impacted our students' confidence levels as indicated by the post self-assessment survey. Allowing them to demonstrate their creativity and express their knowledge of the content uniquely allowed them to expand upon

previously existing knowledge. Based off of their journal responses, students reported feeling comfortable, calm and relaxed throughout the arts integrated lessons.

Our observations revealed that student engagement was higher during each lesson. Their focus was maintained as most students were able to stay on task because they enjoyed what they were learning about. Their attention span also increased as each lesson kept the students actively engaged.

This study has brought some new ideas for future action research investigation. Our study focused on integrating the arts while monitoring the outcomes of student engagement, critical thinking, and creative response. Although we saw many great outcomes from this study, we determined that further research could be conducted by focusing on one of these skills at a time. Being able to hone in on one of the skills, as compared to all three, would allow us to focus and develop that skill more soundly. Focusing on just one skill for an extended period of time could benefit our students as they will build on these skills throughout high school and college.

Another possibility for further research would be to narrow the focus to a specific type of art. Visual arts, literary arts, and music/dance were all incorporated within the given research time period. The exposure to the different forms of art was important, however by implementing only one form of art could possibly advance our students' achievement levels and generate more specific results. The study could then focus more on the outcomes generated from the arts lessons, because it would be easier to identify what specifically worked and what didn't based on the strategy used.

Overall, it was apparent that the arts had a positive effect on student learning. The arts integrated lessons fostered higher levels of engagement as students stayed on task, collaborated with peers and asked questions throughout the lessons. Students were also able to showcase their

knowledge by utilizing their creativity generated by the arts. Furthermore, through the use of evaluating, inferencing, and explaining students enhanced their critical thinking skills.

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