

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

Julie Findlay
Ed 400
Professor Elliott
Trinity College May 2011

Introduction

- Research question: How does the classroom environment in the arts program compare to a more traditional math class?
 - How do the students respond to the differences?
 - What changes, if any, occurred within the arts classroom?
- Why this question?

Thesis

- The arts provide a learning environment that changes the classroom dynamics, which encourages different types of relationships to form as well as a different type of learning to occur in comparison with more traditional classes.

Methods

- Interviews
 - Interviewed 3 teaching artists and 2 teachers
 - Writing prompts from the students
- Participant observation within the *Moving Matters!* Program
 - Field notes
- Three observations of math classes
- Note: All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants

Limitations

- Limitations
 - Scheduling Conflicts
 - Snow Days
 - CMT's
 - Teacher schedules
 - Small sample size due to time constraints

Where does this fit into other literature?

- Many debates on importance of art education and how it should be implemented
- Meier, D., Kohn, A., Darling-Hammond, L., Sizer, T. & Wood, G. (2004). *Many Children Left Behind*.
 - Critically analyzes the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001
 - Standardization and accountability
 - Testing and assessment
 - Devalues subjects not tested
 - Budgeting costs

Where does this fit into other literature?

- Kagan, J. (2009). Six Good Reasons for Advocating the Importance of Arts
 - The arts can improve reading and arithmetic skills for students
 - Through the skills and ways of thinking that the arts teach
 - Through increasing interests, the arts can provide motivation for students to stay in school
 - The arts have the potential to bridge learning and eventual success
- Eisner, E. (1998). “Does experience in the arts boost academic achievement?”
 - The arts as a supplement
 - What the arts teach
 - Making judgments
 - Words and numbers do not define limits of our cognition
 - More than one right answer
 - Increase creativity
 - Motivation and persistence
 - Confidence
 - Active participation in the learning experience

Themes

- Teacher intentions and goals
- Increased participation
- Higher levels of acceptance
- Increased motivation
- Changes in interaction with peers

Classroom Dynamics

Traditional Classroom

- Desks organized in small groups
- All students can see both the blackboard and the teacher's desk
 - Students often face each other's backs
- Teacher facilitates discussion and students may participate when they are called on
- When working on an activity, the students work alone or in pairs and focus only on completing their own work
- Students are not encouraged to work together and help each other
- Focus is more on individual achievement

Arts Program Classroom

- Desks are pushed to the walls of the classroom, creating an open space in the middle
- During discussions, all students sit in a circle so that everyone can see each other and everyone is an equal participant
- Although the teaching artist is in charge, the students are encouraged to facilitate and lead discussions for the class
- When working on an activity, all students are encouraged to work together as one large group
- Focus is largely on group achievement

Student Skills and Abilities

Traditional Classroom

- The students are encouraged to finish worksheets and assignments with the one “right” answer
- Discussion questions tended to have one answer and then the teacher moved on to the next question
- Students are told what they can do and when they can do it, given little freedom of choice
- Students who do not want to participate can often sit back and not be noticed

Arts Program Classroom

- Students are encouraged to think about the discussions and questions from various points of view
- Discussions encouraged the students to build off one another and really use each other to get the most out of the discussion and lead it further
- Students are encouraged to take risks
- Students recognize they are a valuable part to the classroom
- Students get to collaborate and work together to come up with a final dance that they will all perform together

Art Program Quotes

- “The arts give students the opportunity to explore, recognize talents or just what brings them enjoyment” – Holly (Teacher)
- “ I have witnessed students who continually get in trouble and exhibit negative attitudes shift when we are there are become active participants recognizing their value to the process” – Sarah (Teaching Artist/Program Coordinator)
- “They (the students) learn to behave, to listen, to understand... the arts teach self-expressions and a higher level of acceptance” – Mike (Teaching Artist)

Peer Interaction

Traditional Classroom

- Success and completion at individual level
- One student not completing an assignment or not completing it well does not affect the other students
- Several students refused to complete worksheets at all
- If students were told to get into groups, they were groups of 2 or 3 students that worked quietly
- Students focus on their own performance and abilities

Arts Program Classroom

- The same students who had refused to complete the worksheets were active participants in the program
- The students all have to work together to make the dance work
- By the last few sessions, the students had began to focus not only on their own performance, but on helping others perform well
- Really took control of the learning and creating process. The students also became motivated on their own.
- Felt ownership over the entire groups' actions

Art Program Quotes

- “I may really be seeing another level of comfort amongst my students” – Elise (Teacher)
- “I see a little of my students holding each other accountable for knowing what to do” – Elise (Teacher)
- “The students within each class come to understand they are part of a community that needs each and every person for their project to be successful” – Sarah (Teaching Artist/Program Coordinator)

Moving Matters! Program Implementation

- “I think that all aspects that the program offers benefit my students. They are creating, working together, and having fun.” – Ashley (Teacher)
- “It is well organized and fluid to work with and around scheduling problems and testing regiments in the school... they created a very successful blueprint for integration into the school system.” - Meredith (Teaching Artist)
- “I know working on a common project, such as this performance, is important because students are a part of creating something special together. I hope this leads to my students feeling more confident and proud as they display their talent.” - Elise (Teacher)

Moving Matters! Program Implementation

- “Communication between all parties needs to be more consistent.” – Mike (Teaching Artist)
 - Lack of real commitment by some of the teachers in the schools
 - Not all teachers followed through with what they said they would do
 - Writing prompts not completed
 - Permission slips not sent and returned
 - T-shirts not decorated for the final performance
- Working with schools can be difficult
 - CMT’s
 - Small space in the classrooms
 - Limited time to meet because of strict curriculum plans

Moving Matters! Program Experience

- Overall experience very positive
 - The students gained so much confidence and gained an important appreciation for the arts
 - “I have witnessed positive changes and growth in the teachers that have chosen to continue to participate, through their approach with their students.” – Sarah (Teaching Artist/Program Coordinator)
 - “I have found it to be a wonderful experience for the children. Most of them have not had many experiences such as those of their neighboring suburban peers, and I feel it is a wonderful opportunity and experience they can take with them – especially the final performance.”- Lauren (Teacher)
 - “I have not seen any negative results. The effects are both long-term and short-term.” – Sarah (Teaching Artist/Program Coordinator)

Conclusion

- Important findings for the field of art education
- This type of environment provided by the arts program is essential in schools, although the curricular design is essential for the changes, not just any art program
 - Need to create a learning environment that shifts classroom dynamics
 - Encourage different relationships to form
 - Students react positively to this type of classroom environment
- The teacher intentions and goals in the curricular design might matters more than the classroom content
 - It may not be what the teachers are teaching necessarily, but how the students are responding differently to the classroom dynamics that is important. The design of the art program created an environment that encouraged a different type of learning to occur, teaching confidence, persistence, creation and active participation and the students may be reacting to that focus

Implications for Further Research

- How do schools manage budget costs as well as maintaining art education classes?
- What causes the changes in the student experience and the learning process?
- Can these changes be implemented and experienced in core subjects as well as the arts?

References

- Chapman, L. H. (2005). No child left behind in art? *Art Education*, 58(1), pp. 6-16.
- Dickinson, D. (1997). Learning through the arts. *New Horizons for Learning*. Retrieved from http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/arts/dickinson_Irnarts.htm
- Fiske, E. (2000). Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning. *GIA Reader*, 11(1).
- Kagan, J. (2009). Six Good Reasons for Advocating the Importance of Arts in School.
- Meier, D., Kohn A., Darling-Hammond, L., Sizer, T. R., &
- Silberman, C. (1973). The Open Classroom Reader. *Vintage Books*, 133-148.
- Wood, G. (2004). *Many children left behind*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.