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# Teacher Perceptions of Arts Integration in Lower Elementary School Classrooms

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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF ARTS INTEGRATION IN LOWER ELEMENTARY  
SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

By

Holly Badger

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford

May 2019

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## **ABSTRACT:**

In this thesis, I will address the perceptions of elementary school teachers on the use of arts integration as a teaching practice in their classrooms and how those perceptions impact student performance. Throughout my student teaching experience this year, I engaged in a reflective practice of making field notes as I observed, assisted with, and taught arts-integrated lessons in a kindergarten classroom. Additionally, I conducted one-on-one interviews with three in-service teachers at the rural Mississippi elementary school in which I was placed. I made this a mixed methods study by adding a third source of data via an online questionnaire taken by in-service teachers at the same Mississippi elementary school. I went through a process of coding and analyzing the data from both the personal field notes and the teacher interviews in order to establish the perceptions on arts integration, as well as the reasoning behind the perceptions, of both the in-service teachers and myself as a pre-service teacher. I analyzed the data from the questionnaire as well to create a more comprehensive understanding of the results of the study. Based on the findings, I highlighted ways in which teachers can learn to engage in the use of arts integration in their classrooms. I found that while teachers may perceive constraints that hold them back from using the arts, they do see a high level of value in using arts integration in order to improve students' cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

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## **CHAPTER 1: The Problem**

In this section, I will explain why arts integration is a practice that teachers can adopt in their classrooms in order to maximize the academic, social, and emotional potential of every one of their students. Integrating art helps both students and teachers approach subject matter and express knowledge in creative, individualized, and nontraditional ways, allowing all students to be reached and to succeed in the classroom. “The arts add the kind of richness and depth to learning and instruction that is critical to healthy development” and promote student abilities such as creative and flexible thinking, viewing problems from various perspectives, extending their imaginations, and building up problem solving strategies (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999, p. 36). The purpose of this thesis will be to demonstrate that arts integration is a successful way to teach the whole child, reach all students, and enhance the learning process for students. In the end, I will ask the question: “How do teacher perceptions of arts integration in the classroom impact student performance?”

### **Defining the Problem**

If the arts can have such widespread benefits for the students in their classrooms, then why is arts integration often ignored or overlooked? The problem is that teachers, even if they value the arts, often neglect arts integration due to restraints such as lack of



time, lack of knowledge about teaching the arts, lack of resources, or conflicting ideas about their freedom and autonomy to use the arts in their classrooms (Oreck, 2004). Because teachers have so many responsibilities as it is, they often focus on goals like preparing students for state tests and lose sight of the reasons they initially chose to teach, such as helping all students learn and grow in their classroom. When teachers face such pressures and lack an understanding of how they can implement the arts, arts integration gets downplayed and teachers miss an opportunity to reach students through unique and different avenues.

Successful teachers of arts integration acknowledge that art processes provide them with techniques that can help them reach the most students in a deeper ways (Oreck, 2006). While it is true that “each art form requires certain unique facilitation skills, effective teaching of the arts shares many basic features with good teaching in other subjects,” allowing teachers to take what they already know and apply it in the context of the arts (Oreck, 2004, p. 66). If teachers come to realize that teaching the arts is more dependent on one’s self-confidence and attitude rather than “artistic attitudes and self-confidence —rather than arts-rich backgrounds or previously developed sets of skills—are the critical elements for arts use in teaching, then professional development can make a difference in promoting arts-inclusive pedagogy” (Oreck, 2004, p. 65).

### **Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to reflect on my experience teaching and observing arts-integrated lessons during my student teaching experience with kindergarten students

at Lafayette Elementary School in Oxford, Mississippi. This will allow me to track the growth of my students as they experience arts integration as well as allowing me to track how well I am able to integrate arts in an effective and impactful way. Through reflecting on my experiences and observing how arts integration impacts the students in my placement classroom, I will be able to demonstrate the positive impacts that arts integration has for all students.

### **The Question**

This thesis will look at the following question: How do teacher perceptions of arts integration in the classroom impact student performance? The following section will review current research and opinions about the approach of arts integration and its implementation in the classroom.

## **CHAPTER 2: Literature Review**

In this section, I will highlight relevant research on the definition of arts integration, its challenges and misconceptions, the need for arts integration, and how it can be implemented effectively in the classroom. By using this research, I will be able to examine and reflect on my own experiences using arts integration in the classroom and focus on my research question: How do teacher perceptions of and student engagement with arts integration in the classroom impact student performance?

### **Defining Arts Integration**

To begin this thesis, it is crucial to define what arts integration is, explain how it differs from other types of art programs within schools, and highlight how it relates to teacher beliefs and philosophies about how children learn. Arts integration is “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” (Silverstein & Layne, 2010, p. 1). Essentially, arts integration connects art with another subject area in order for each subject to enhance the learning of the other.

An important aspect of this concept is that it is a holistic approach to teaching, meaning both art and the subject with which it is being integrated become intertwined and hold equal weight and priority (Railey, Best, & Wolff, 2018). Similarly, it has also

been referred to as an “effort to build a set of relationships between learning in the arts and learning in the others skills and subjects of the curriculum” (Arts Education Partnership, 2003, p. 3). Because this approach hinges on placing equal emphasis on art and the other subject areas, it is important to explain how it differs from other arts-related activities within a school. The umbrella of art contains a variety of forms, including visual art, music, dance, and drama/theatre. The Kennedy Center’s Changing Education Through the Arts (CETA) program identifies three main routes through which these art forms are taught in schools: art as curriculum, arts-enhanced curriculum, and arts-integrated curriculum. While each of the three approaches are important and justifiable, it is necessary to highlight the differences for the purpose of this thesis (Silverstein & Layne, n.d.).

First, art as curriculum is an approach in which art is taught separately as its own subject, and this often takes place outside of the general education classroom with a specialist teacher. With this approach, students focus on gaining knowledge and skills in one of the specific art forms, such as visual art, music, dance, or theatre (Silverstein & Layne, n.d.). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education, reviewed by Parsad and Spiegelman (2012), support the notion that much of the art offered in schools is taught via this method. Of the public elementary schools that taught the arts, most schools employed arts specialists to teach them. Arts specialists taught music in 91% of elementary schools, visual arts in 84%, dance in 57%, and theatre/drama in 42% (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012). Further, these art specialists taught most often in separate spaces outside of the general education classroom.

Regarding music instruction, about 77% of the elementary schools reported using “dedicated rooms with special equipment” as the primary location for music instruction (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012, p. 15). Similarly, 68% of schools teaching visual arts used a separate room to teach the subject. Dance and theatre were more frequently taught in the general education classroom at 24% and 34%, respectively. However, this is likely due to the sharp decrease in schools that teach dance and theatre as compared to music and visual arts. While music was taught in some form at 94% of schools and visual arts at 83%, dance was taught at only 3%, and theatre was not far ahead at 4% (Parsad & Spiegelman, 2012).

Another approach to the arts is the arts-enhanced curriculum approach. While art as curriculum teaches art as the primary content, the arts-enhanced curriculum approach uses art “as a device or strategy to support other curriculum areas, but no objectives in the art form are explicit” (Silverstein & Layne, n.d., p. 1). With this method, art becomes a way to assist learning in another subject area, though no art objectives themselves are taught. Rather than becoming part of the learning objective(s), art is used “a ‘hook’ to engage students in learning content” in math, social studies, science, language arts, etc. (Silverstein & Layne, n.d., p. 1). This method is an easy way for teachers to incorporate art activities into the general education classroom because it does not require the teacher to have much or any training in an art form. However, the presence of art in this method is often superficial and “subservient to other academic subjects” (May & Robinson, 2015). Still, this method is easily confused or mistaken for arts-integration, the focus of this thesis.

Arts-integrated curriculum is similar to arts-enhanced curriculum in that art is used to aid learning in another content area, but it goes a step further. It becomes a “mutually reinforcing” process in which the other subject area helps to enhance the learning of art objectives as well. (Silverstein & Layne, n.d., p. 1). Learning objectives in both the art form and the other subject hold equal importance in the lesson being taught. This approach is the focus of this thesis due to research that shows art instruction to be highly effective in improving student performance, social skills, motivation and attitudes, and engagement, among others (Hancock & Wright, 2018). While art instruction in any form has shown to have positive impacts on students in at least some way, integrating art instruction into the curriculum allows each subject to have a direct impact on student learning by simultaneously enhancing the content of both art and another core subject.

### **Challenges and Misconceptions**

Now that arts integration has been defined and explained, it is important to understand the challenges and misconceptions that cause teachers to neglect using this approach in their classrooms. For a variety of reasons, teachers choose to forego arts integration. Some of these complaints include lacking self-efficacy in teaching the arts, lacking time, and having other priorities (May & Robinson, 2015). LaJevic (2013) also notes that arts integration is challenged by time and space constraints, lack of materials, lack of knowledge of the arts and low comfort levels in teaching them. While teachers find various challenges to integrating art into the curriculum, these challenges are often

just misconceptions or misunderstandings about how art can be incorporated into lesson plans.

Perhaps one of the biggest reasons teachers avoid arts integration is due to their own perceptions of the arts. Because each teacher has experienced different degrees and types of exposure to the arts throughout their own lives, they will have differing opinions regarding its implementation and its effects in the classroom. LaJevic (2013) states that the reason many teachers feel they have insufficient knowledge of arts integration is due to the lack of arts in their own education. Further, since many teachers did not experience learning about or through the arts during their schooling, arts integration becomes an unknown, scary place for some people. (LaJevic, 2013).

A large part of this issue lies in the fact that general education teachers are not developing a basic literacy in art or arts integration (Ballard, 1990). Ballard (1990) highlights the lack of teacher preparation in the arts in noting that taking only one or two arts courses in college cannot compare to the amount of experience one gains in teaching other subjects, such as language, math, or social studies. Sotiropoulou-Zormpala (2016) agreed that arts education at universities is generally inadequate and would benefit from some improvement. In a study of teachers' art perceptions, the most frequently mentioned issue with integrating the arts was "the need for more training to gain skills and build self-efficacy in using the arts" (Oreck, 2004, p. 63). Because they lack training or experience in teaching the arts, teachers often lean toward more traditional, orthodox approaches based on their own arts experiences, withholding them from experimenting with new ideas and possibilities in their classrooms (Santín & Torruella, 2017).

Though future teachers might not always receive extended courses and training in teaching the arts, arts integration has actually shown to benefit not only the students but also the teachers. One of these benefits relates to the teacher's instructional skills and ability to connect with students, particularly those students whom they otherwise might struggle to reach. Railey, Best, & Wolff (2018) report that research has shown that arts integration positively impacts teacher perceptions of their own abilities to meet the needs of diverse and disengaged students. Further research also supports the idea that professional awareness when teaching diverse groups of students can improve through the use of arts integration (Railey, Best, & Wolff, 2018). In another study, teachers who used arts-integrated curriculum reported that it allowed them to "find deeper meanings" and provided "a window of exploration for the children" (Zwirn, 2005, p. 29). Along with helping teachers reach all students, integrating art allows teachers to find innovative ways to approach their practice by developing self-confidence and skills in that area (Railey, Best, & Wolff, 2018). Specifically, a study of 10 elementary, middle, and high schools that boast strong arts programs and have large numbers of economically disadvantaged students found that teacher engagement and satisfaction was greatly increased by integrating art (Railey, Best, & Wolff, 2018, p.3). Though some teachers doubt their abilities to teach the arts or have misconceptions about its effectiveness, integrating arts can actually combat their worries and be just as beneficial for their professional development as it is for their students' success.

Another common challenge is the amount of time required to plan and implement arts-integrated lessons. Wintemberg (2017) notes that teachers often believe that arts



integration within common core lessons would be a waste of time or that they would not know where to start when it comes to creating the lessons. LaJevic (2013) found that teachers claim it is easier and less time-consuming to assign a task such as a reading passage or a worksheet to their students than to prepare and teach arts-integrated lessons. In a study on teachers who used arts in the classroom, Oreck (2006) found that a “lack of time constantly challenged the teachers’ use of the arts,” regardless of the teachers’ personal values or interest in the arts (p. 16). A similar study on teachers’ perceptions of arts integration found that time was the most commonly mentioned constraint and that these comments stemmed from feelings of pressure to teach mandated curriculum and worry about their autonomy to take a more creative, non-traditional route (Oreck, 2004). Because teachers fret taking extra time to create and prepare lessons that integrate the arts with the other subjects they teach, they are withheld from seeing the potential for student success via arts integration (May, 2013).

Though teachers may find that integrating the arts into their lesson plans may be a daunting and time-consuming task, there are multiple ways in which they can gradually adopt arts integration into their practice without surrendering all of their free time. The first point for teachers to remember is that they can start slowly. There is no obligation to integrate arts in every lesson; rather, simply choosing one lesson or project to integrate with any of the art forms will allow the teacher to test the waters and build an understanding of what arts integration looks like and how it is best implemented in the classroom. (May, 2013). The time it takes to plan one traditional lesson compared to the time to plan one arts-integrated lesson is not different enough to excuse teachers from

attempting arts integration, especially given the vast benefits it has been shown to provide for both students and teachers.

Along with starting small, teachers can also overcome a lack of time by collaborating with other teachers to get ideas and advice. When teachers engage in conversations with their colleagues, they can share and borrow ideas for integrating arts (May, 2013). Teachers regularly interact and meet with their fellow teachers, so taking a few minutes to discuss ideas and plans for arts integration can easily fit into a teacher's typical routine. While integrating arts may take a little extra time on the teacher's part, it is worth the effort considering how powerful of a tool it can be for improving student outcomes.

Another reason teachers might avoid arts integration is due to issues with funding and financial support, leading also to a lack of materials and resources. Even with convincing research supporting art, Hancock and Wright (2018) note that the arts are often pushed the side, becoming the first thing to do away with and the last to add when budgets become an issue. Teachers who were asked about constraints to integrating art explained that lack of supplies and lack of money to purchase more supplies were continuing obstacles for them (Oreck, 2004). In a study of teachers who used the arts in their classrooms despite severe limitations, any materials they had were acquired with their own money (Oreck, 2006).

It is no secret that teachers and instructors are some of the lowest paid college graduates and will likely not want to spend loads of their own money on art materials (Suneson, 2018). However, art has been shown to be particularly beneficial for students

who are disadvantaged economically and might not receive exposure to the various art forms in other arenas (Hancock & Wright, 2018). Students who are in lower socioeconomic areas can succeed in the classroom due to arts integration even more than other students would, which makes it vital that teachers in these locations are able to access the necessary materials. As spoken by teachers who have used art despite facing challenges with finance or materials, they were able to accomplish arts integration because their “artistic approaches were congruent with their educational values, their deep caring about children, and their general attitude toward life” (Oreck, 2006, p. 19). By focusing on the reasons that they chose to teach, teachers can find ways to overcome obstacles and integrate art in their classrooms.

One more reason that teachers tend to avoid arts integration is due to the fact that art is often seen as something extra or something to be taught separately from other curriculum. Wintemberg (2017) highlights this as one of the top 5 misconceptions about arts integration, noting that teachers often think it is best to teach core subjects, such as science, math, or social studies, separately from art. A teacher in one study described art as “the icing on the cake” which spreads the misconstrued idea that art is simply decoration and not of equal educational value as it is meant to be through arts integration (LaJevic, 2013, p. 9). Others seem to disregard the arts unless they are proven to have specific benefits for student performance in the other academic disciplines, neglecting the other valuable educational elements of art such as imagination, creativity, self-expression, and aesthetic understanding and pleasure (Sotiropoulou-Zormpala, 2016).

While art certainly serves purposes such as decoration or embellishment to classrooms and lessons, the purpose of arts integration is not met when art is used only to enhance other areas. Arts integration is aimed to establish meaningful associations in the areas of art, classroom content, and everyday life by “highlighting the arts’ unique ability to reconnect the inherently related academic subjects” (LaJevic, 2013, p. 9). Teachers who have successfully integrated arts into their classrooms rarely separated the arts from the academic content being taught but rather intertwined the two (Oreck, 2006). One specific teacher commented about the use of arts, saying “I think it has to be part of what’s going on in the classroom and the curriculum” (Oreck, 2006, pg. 11). When arts integration was used to its fullest potential, teachers found that it easily aligned with the basic ways that teachers thought about their curriculum and allowed for connected, thematic experiences (Oreck, 2006). Arts integration is meant to enhance learning in other subject areas, but true integration means that learning about art itself is also enhanced by the subject with which it is integrated. When teachers are able to see art as an equal part of the curricular content rather than just a decoration or embellishment, arts integration can reach its full potential in the classroom.

### **The Need for Arts Integration**

While pressures to cover mandated curriculum, prepare for state testing, or other fears might make some teachers hesitant to adopt arts integration into his or her practice, there are immense benefits to this approach that can allow both students and teachers to maximize their potential in the classroom. While improving student academic

performance and cognitive skills is certainly among the greatest benefits of arts integration, it has also been shown to improve social skills, emotional skills, self-esteem, and engagement and motivation, among others.

Perhaps the reason this approach is so essential is that it provides those benefits for all students, particularly those who are disadvantaged or at-risk in some way. This can include students of low socio-economic status, English Language Learners, and special needs students to name a few. One study of an arts integration program used in a preschool found that the program provided equal achievement growth for children from low-income families as compared to students from more advantaged backgrounds (Brown, Benedett, & Armistead, 2010). Another key finding emphasizes that learning through the arts can help “level the playing field” for students who come from disadvantaged circumstances or backgrounds (Fiske, 1999, p. viii). Other researchers found that differences in achievement between high-arts and low-arts youth were significant in regards to economically disadvantaged students (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999). Hancock and Wright (2018) explain this further:

When integrated into the classroom, the arts can engage otherwise disengaged students. Arts integration has a particularly high impact on disaffected, disadvantaged, and at-risk students, improving their level of engagement and control, improving their ability to communicate effectively, giving them a better attitude toward school, decreasing their frequency in inappropriate behavior, and increasing their overall academic performance.

(p. 431)

Part of the reason that arts integration can be especially beneficial in this area is that children who come from low-income families or racial/ethnic minorities tend to have a disconnection between school and home, but arts education may be the link that helps students form those school to home connections (Brown, Benedett, & Armistead, 2010). Arts integration also allows for students to express knowledge through a variety of verbal and nonverbal approaches. This allows students with language delays, which can be common for children in poverty, to have better access to content in the classroom and to further their language development (Brown, Benedett, & Armistead, 2010).

A subcategory of students who are often disadvantaged in school are English Language Learners, or ELL students, because they have the added responsibility of learning the language along with the regular curriculum that all the students must learn. Using the Wolf Trap Early Learning Through the Arts Residency program which integrates performing arts to teach curriculum to elementary students, teachers noticed that many ELL students developed higher levels of confidence and improved communication skills. Some noted that students became more confident when participating in lessons and making attempts to speak English (Hancock & Wright, 2018). Another teacher in that program stated that her students developed much greater confidence to speak in large-group settings, which was one of her biggest concerns for her ELL students (Hancock & Wright, 2018). Appel (2006) highlights more benefits for ELL students, such as the development of their academic language proficiency and exposure to “a variety of ways to learn and use vocabulary” and “collaboration with other pupils” (p. 15). Through art in the classroom, students are able to express things that they

might not be able to or feel comfortable sharing verbally. This is powerful for ELL students as they are still learning to express themselves through speaking or writing the language but can use movements and acting to express themselves instead.

Students with special needs make up another group which can be especially impacted by arts integration. Using the Wolf Trap program, teachers saw vast improvements in their students with special needs, particularly in the areas of communication and engagement. Non-verbal communication and expression of students with autism was improved through the movements and chants used. Another teacher commented, “My autistic student is never engaged, and he loves the chants. The repetition gives him a lot of comfort in knowing what is coming next.” (Hancock & Wright, 2018, p. 439). Along with improved communication and engagement, the use of performing arts also helped reinforce the idea that special needs students are highly capable of participating in many different activities(Hancock & Wright, 2018).

One of the benefits that all students can reap through arts integration is improved cognitive skills and, in turn, academic performance. The importance of the arts allowing students to develop cognitive skills is that those skills can be transferred and applied to their learning in any other core subject. Each of the four main art forms helps develop cognitive skills in numerous ways. While some of the cognitive benefits may overlap among the art forms, there are unique ways in which visual arts, music, theater, and dance each improve cognition for students.

Visual arts have shown to improve reading skills, text interpretation, content and organization of writing, reasoning abilities, and attention to detail (Appel, 2006). Music

helps develop spatial and temporal reasoning, mathematics reasoning, literacy, and English fluency for non-native speakers (Appel, 2006). With theater, students can increase their story comprehension, understanding of characters, writing proficiency, problem solving abilities, understanding of complex relationships, and understanding of conflict and resolution (Appel, 2006). Finally, dance can enhance organization, non-verbal reasoning, individual and collaborative work skills, mathematical concepts and application, and connections to history and social studies (Appel, 2006). While most of those are specific skills related to a specific subject area, there are also more general ways in which the arts can improve cognition.

A study which observed schools incorporating different varieties and degrees of the arts found that children in the high-arts group had stronger abilities to express thoughts and ideas, exert their imaginations, and take risks in learning than the children in the low-arts group (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999). Through the same study, it was found that the students in high-arts groups showed stronger measures of creativity, fluency, originality, and elaboration, as well as more willingness to seek alternative explanations and solutions to problems they encountered (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999). The teachers of these students “emphasized that young people involved in the arts were able to unify divergent thoughts and feelings within representational forms that make it possible for them to express their ideas in many different ways” (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999, p. 39). In addition, the arts involve multiple areas of the brain which promotes critical and complex thinking (Baker, 2013). Being able to think critically, form unified thoughts, and express ideas in multiple ways are more broad



skills, but they are just as important for cognitive development because they are carried over in all aspects of one's education and life.

Another aspect of a student's educational experience that is positively affected by arts integration is social-emotional interaction. Because the art forms often require collaboration and group work, students spend a lot of time learning how to interact with others, cooperative in social situations, and regulate their emotions. Though all art forms can influence social-emotional behavior in positive ways, theater and dance especially have shown to help students develop interpersonal skills because of their collaborative nature. Students who participated in a creative drama program reported that they learned about courtesy, peer-to-peer interactions, getting along with classmates, and listening and speaking better (Deasy, 2002). Another social benefit of theater and dance is that the "highly interpersonal nature" requires engagement with universal human traits, verbal and nonverbal interaction, and a sense of trust and cooperation (Zwirn, 2005, p. 27). Other skills children have learned through the arts include taking turns, sharing, and putting needs of the group above needs of their own, which all apply both inside and outside of the school setting (Brouillette, 2009). Learning about taking initiative, expressing leadership, and showing respect for the ideas of others were also important gains (Brouillette, 2009).

In addition to interpersonal skills, art can increase emotional responses and regulation. Research shows that students learn to understand the feelings of others through drama as it helps them develop empathy towards others (Deasy, 2002). Teachers also commented on how art experiences helped students develop appropriate

communication skills, particularly in expressing their negative emotions such as “anger, frustration, fear, confusion, and unhappiness” (Mason, Steedly, and Thormann, n.d., p. 9). Some children may not have the chance to experience many social interactions with peers before starting kindergarten, making it that much more impactful that art helps students develop these competencies during school (Brouillette, 2009).

Other benefits of arts integration include increased student motivation and engagement in class. In a study of classrooms in which 67% of students were English Language Learners, 66.7% of teachers reported that arts integration significantly increased their students’ motivation (Hancock & Wright, 2018). A school-wide approach called Learning Through the Arts documented the effects of arts education, and comments about motivation to learn were prominent and frequent throughout the reports that students, teachers, parents, and administrators gave about the LTTA experience (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005). One particular student expressed how arts integration motivated him in other subjects: “Music brightens up the mind. When you learn something new, you feel good, and that makes you feel good in other subjects like math” (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005, p. 124). The same study found strong evidence that being involved in the arts was tied to being engaged in learning at school (Smithrim & Upitis, 2005). Part of the reason art is so useful in engaging students is because of its unique ability to encourage sustained attention spans for children (Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskaya, Hardiman, 2011). More research indicates that musical arts may inspire students with learning problems in both elementary and middle school to attain higher levels of motivation regarding their own learning (Deasy, 2002). In relation to

remembering information learned in class, arts integration is key because “students will likely be more motivated to engage in artistic activities than to simply repeat after the teacher” (Rinne et al., 2011, p. 90). By making learning more interesting and offering a new approach, arts integration can motivate students to learn.

### **How to Integrate Arts Effectively**

There are many benefits to arts integration in the classroom, but there are certain ways that teachers can integrate arts to make it the most effective for the students and for themselves. Arts integration goes beyond simply incorporating art activities into curriculum from time to time. Because arts integration is an approach to teaching, it is directly related to each teacher’s unique beliefs about how students learn. It becomes a key component of one’s daily practice which is heavily based on beliefs about the ways students learn (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). Arts integration is a very student-centered approach that allows for students to engage with hands-on, problem-solving activities as they explore the connections between an art form and another subject area. It is “grounded in the belief that learning is actively built, experiential, evolving, collaborative, problem-solving, and reflective” (Silverstein & Layne, 2010, p. 2). To truly integrate art, it is crucial that teachers adopt the ideas of student-centered, active, reflective learning into their philosophies and believe that this approach not only improves student understanding of art but also their understanding of other core subjects.

One key way to effectively integrate the arts is to collaborate with others. This includes fellow teachers, art specialist teachers (if available at the school), more

experienced teachers, and administration. Effective arts integration requires teachers to collaborate with many colleagues, including those within and those outside of their disciplines, in order to structure the learning to which each of them will contribute (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999). The collaborating groups should consist of “teachers with complementary skills who will share equal responsibility for planning collective goals and objectives to provide meaningful integrated lessons” (May & Robinson, 2015, p. 21). Another important part of collaboration is having the support of the administration in planning the daily schedule so that teachers have ample time to research and test new ideas and to maximize the potential of the group as a whole (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999). Through a study of teachers who used the arts in their classrooms, it was found that collaborating with artists, colleagues, and specialists within the school promoted important connections between artistic ideas and the curriculum taught (Oreck, 2006). It is also important that ongoing teacher support is met through meetings with colleagues and observing art classes or other teachers who teach arts-integrated lessons (Oreck, 2004). One of the best resources a teacher can have is other teachers, so reaching out to them is crucial to effectively use arts integration.

Another way that teachers can most effectively integrate arts is by reaching out to the community to find resources. Places and groups such as “museums, symphonies, performing arts centers and university arts departments/schools” have education and outreach centers devoted to collaborating with both schools and districts (Appel, 2006, p. 16). Many of these places often have lesson plan templates, case studies, and other valuable information that teachers can take advantage of when learning how to integrate

the arts (Appel, 2006). Resources like lesson plans can also be found online through the websites of those organizations. Something as simple as an online search can bring up many resources and examples of arts-integrated lessons to which teachers can refer as they begin planning their lessons.

Along with seeking help and resources from others, arts integration can be more effective when a teacher engages in professional development workshops focused on using art in the classroom. Nearly all studies pointed to these workshops as key ways for teachers to overcome their fears related to arts integration. Oreck (2006) found that among teachers who integrated the arts in their classrooms, all of them worked in schools that offered arts-based professional development programs that were provided by top arts-in-education organizations. While the workshops are specifically beneficial for teacher development, a key factor in student development was the opportunity for professional development that the teachers gained through the arts workshops (Brouillette, 2009). These workshops are particularly beneficial when taught by “teaching artists/arts providers (who have expertise and experience in working with standards and adoptions)” (Appel, 2006, p. 16). Zwirn (2005) highlights the duality of these workshops:

In the workshops, teachers assumed a dual existence; learning to think like teachers of the arts, they were also proxies for young students experiencing the learning methods being taught. The duality of these teachers’ roles revealed a basic challenge: how to connect abstract ideas to the students’ experience.

(p. 25-26)

Ultimately, these workshops allow teachers to learn how to best teach arts-integrated lessons by exposing them to what the art experience is like for the students in their classrooms.

Incorporating art into lesson plans can add elements of fun, excitement, and new approaches to learning for students; however, truly integrating the arts effectively also requires that teachers align the objectives of their arts-integrated lessons with standards and frameworks in both the arts and the other disciplines with which it is being integrated (Appel, 2006). It is crucial that teachers find the connections across subject areas and align lesson plans accordingly. By holding students “accountable for significant learning in both the art form and the other subject,” true arts integration is accomplished in the classroom (Silverstein & Layne, 2010, p. 7). Another key part of this is that the art objective should continue to evolve and deepen as the students master it just as objectives in other disciplines would; a student cannot deeply learn content in art by participating in just one lesson (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). As the objectives in other disciplines grow, the art objectives should grow just the same as the teacher continues to involve them in a variety of lessons.

The potential of arts integration to promote student development and success in the classroom can also be maximized when teachers use the arts to differentiate learning for their students. Arts integration is a way for teachers to appeal to a variety of different students as well as finding ways to make learning interesting and comprehensive (Arts Education Partnership, 2003). In a study of teachers who used the arts and recognized “the diversity of student abilities, intelligences, and learning styles,” the teachers were

able to use the arts to reach students who could respond better to non-verbal stimuli, needed active movement, recognized spatial patterns, and led dramatic or musical experiences in the class recognized (Oreck, 2006, p. 9). This also offers natural differentiation of instruction because the arts “offer multiple modes of representation, expression, and engagement” (Silverstein & Layne, 2010, p. 5). Arts integration allows for so many approaches to teaching and learning that it can be a highly useful tool for teachers to reach different students in different ways.

By engaging in the practices of collaboration, community outreach, professional development workshops, alignment of standards across disciplines, and differentiated instruction, teachers can allow arts integration to be very effective in their classrooms. Due to the supportive research and potential for improved student success in the classroom and school environment, it is important that teachers discover how arts integration can be used to benefit their students’ learning and their own development as professional educators.

### **CHAPTER 3: Research Methodology**

In order to seek answers to the proposed question, this research is based on the reflections and responses of current elementary teachers as well as my own personal reflections. In this section, I will discuss my data collection, the participants, and the setting. I will also discuss the way in which the various forms of data were generated and analyzed.

#### **Methods of Research**

This is a mixed methods study, integrating methods of both qualitative and quantitative data collection. While qualitative and quantitative research methods have historically been viewed as separate or opposing approaches, there are unique strengths and benefits that unfold when those methods become complementary through a mixed methods study (Plano Clark, 2017). When the qualitative and quantitative methods are combined in research, it leads to conclusions that are more “nuanced, contextualized, and corroborated” (Plano Clark, 2017, p. 305). While two of the three research methods in this study are qualitative, it is the unique integration of the quantitative approach that allows the data to answer more questions and reveal other qualities that the quantitative methods could not address alone. According to Plano Clark (2017), qualitative research alone addresses meanings and experiences related to one’s personal character, but it “cannot examine the prevalence or predictive power of such constructs” (p. 305).



However, the addition of the quantitative method as a follow-up allows the researcher to address other questions that reveal *what* and *how much* (Plano Clark, 2017). By combining both methods of research, I hoped to obtain a more thorough, rounded set of data in order to best address my research question

The first qualitative research method in this study was field notes. I kept continuous field notes in which I self-reflected on the arts integration experiences I observed, assisted with, and led during my time student teaching kindergarten at Lafayette Elementary School. I kept these notes from October 1 through February 13 in which I discussed my personal experiences with arts integration. More details about these field notes is below in the section on data generation.

The second method of qualitative research was a selection of one-on-one interviews with three current teachers at Lafayette Elementary School. In these interviews, I asked the teachers questions about their perceptions of arts integration, their own experiences with arts integration, and what they believe are the benefits and drawbacks of arts integration. I created a list of questions that I asked to all three teachers, and I used an audio-recording application to record their responses. I then transcribed and analyzed the responses. These interviews are described in more depth in the section below on data generation.

The quantitative research method was an online questionnaire sent out to current teachers at Lafayette Elementary School. This questionnaire was composed of 15 questions asking teachers about their perceptions of and personal experiences with arts

integration. The questionnaire is discussed in further detail in the data generation section below.

## Participants

The participants in the study were twenty-six in-service teachers at Lafayette Lower Elementary School. Three of those teachers participated in both the one-on-one interviews and the online questionnaire. Of those three, two of them are general education teachers, and one is the school's art teacher. Below is a table highlighting the interview participants, the grade level they currently teach, their total years of teaching experience, and their years of teaching experience at Lafayette. For the purpose of maintaining their anonymity, I have given them pseudonyms. The rest of the teachers in this study participated only by taking the questionnaire. In addition to the in-service teachers, I was a participant myself through my reflective process of journaling about my experiences with arts integration.

Interview Participants

	Grade Level	Total Years Teaching	Years Teaching at Lafayette
Mrs. Smith	2nd grade	20	4
Mrs. Hamilton	Kindergarten	24	11
Mrs. Jones	Art Teacher; Pre-K through 2nd grade	13	13

## **Setting**

The research for this thesis was conducted at a rural, public elementary school in Lafayette County, Mississippi. The school is made up of students in pre-kindergarten through second grade. This school was chosen for this research project for a variety of reasons. Because it is the school in which I am completing my student teaching, I was able to maximize my opportunities to observe, teach, and assist with arts-integrated lessons which inspired my self-reflective journaling. Secondly, it is a public school district, so understanding the opinions of these teachers on their experiences with arts integration will be beneficial to other public schools teachers and to me as I become an educator next year.

## **Data Generation**

In order to monitor how my own thoughts and feelings about how arts integration developed and changed through my student teaching experience, I reflected on each experience I had in which I observed, assisted with, or taught an arts-integrated lesson. This process of taking field notes serves as one of my two methods of qualitative data. I took these field notes periodically throughout my student teaching experience from October 1 to February 13. From October through November, when I went to Lafayette two days a week, I would write at least 1 entry per week. The field notes written between those dates made up 8 entries. From January to February, in which I went to Lafayette every week day, I wrote at least two entries a week. The field notes written between those dates made up 9 entries, making the entire collection complete with 17 entries. Each of

these entries was about one paragraph in length. I kept a word document in which I dated and typed every entry of my field notes. For each day that I added an entry, I wrote it at the end of that school day on my word document. I began the process for each entry by simply reflecting on each experience, whether that experience was observing, assisting with, or teaching an arts-integrated lesson. Through my reflections, I considered each the following questions: In what ways was art being integrated into the lesson?; How did the teachers react to the lesson?; How did the students react to the lesson?; How were my perceptions of arts integration impacted by the experience? I reflected on both positive and negative experiences in order to capture the most complete and full idea of my perceptions on arts integration as a future teacher.

In addition to the journal entries, my one-on-one interviews with the in-service teachers generated qualitative data for this project. These interviews were conducted during the week of January 14-18, 2019 during regular school hours. Each interview was scheduled at a time that the teacher was available to meet with me, and no other faculty, staff members, or students were present. No teachers were asked to reveal their names or any identifying information during the interview to maintain anonymity. Each teacher also read and signed a consent form acknowledging their willingness to participate and be recorded, as well as understand that their interview would remain anonymous. On average, the interviews lasted about ten minutes each and were recorded using a digital app called VoiceRecorder. Each teacher responded to the same set of nine pre-made questions. These questions required the teachers to think about and discuss their involvement with arts integration, their beliefs about how arts integration impacts

students, and any concerns or drawbacks to arts integration that may make it difficult to incorporate into the classroom. Once the interviews were completed and recorded, they were transcribed.

To make this a mixed methods study, my third form of data was generated through the distribution of an online questionnaire to all in-service teachers at Lafayette Lower Elementary School. This anonymous questionnaire received 26 responses. The questionnaire was made up of 15 questions which discussed the teachers' experiences incorporating art, the opportunity for professional development related to the arts, the amount of training in teaching arts they received throughout their teacher education programs, and their beliefs about how arts integration impacts students.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Self as Researcher**

One crucial aspect of data analysis in any study relates to who the researcher is and how the researcher situates himself or herself within the project. Particularly in relation to qualitative data, the researcher plays a key part during the stage of analysis in which he or she becomes the tool that collects the data and then interprets it to share with others. This brings into question the nature and philosophical perspectives of both the data collection and data analysis methods. For the purpose of this study, the data analysis most closely aligns with the philosophical perspective of interpretivism due to the heavy amount of qualitative data collected. Interpretivism is a type of research which focuses on meaning and seeks to provide an understanding of the meaning that individuals derive

from situations (Swanson, 2005). Interpretivism places the researcher in the role of a listener during an unstructured interview which seeks to describe meanings and individual's ideas in order to result in a greater understanding of how those objective realities are created (Swanson, 2005). In order to address that role and position myself within the research, I have included a piece below in which I describe myself as a person as well as the experiences that have ignited my passion for studying the topic of arts integration in the classroom.

While art had never been more than a minor part of my life up through high school, that quickly changed with all of the experiences I encountered when I came to college at Ole Miss. During my freshman year, I was able to take a class for education majors focusing on art, particularly in relation to the different types of art that could be taught along with methods to teach them to elementary students. Through this class, which I quickly came to love, I was given the task of volunteering for a day with the University Museum located just off the Ole Miss campus. That single event became the starting point that drastically and immediately changed the way I thought about art and teaching art. That first volunteer experience turned into a whole semester of volunteering at the museum and in the local community by teaching art to wide varieties of children. Along with the experiences that took place at the museum, I taught students at local elementary schools, toddlers at the public library, and students at after-school tutoring programs such as LeapFrog. After an incredibly eye-opening semester in which my love for sharing art with children grew immensely, I began an internship with the museum I've now held since the spring of my sophomore year of college. After two years of

after-school ArtZone classes, family days at the museum, and a large variety of other activities and programs for children, I have gained not only invaluable teaching experience but also a deep appreciation for the love and enthusiasm children have when they get to participate in creating art.

One particular experience at the museum that especially drove my passion for arts integration was my time volunteering full-time for the summer at the museum as an AmeriCorps VISTA Summer Associate. This service experience gave me the chance to continue the art teaching that I loved with groups of students who were specifically from families of low socio-economic backgrounds and students at-risk for summer learning loss. Particularly because that experience took place before any of my student teaching experiences, it opened me up to the ways that art can be especially beneficial for such a vast range of students. Despite the differences in family background, home life, and academic performance, I was able to see firsthand how every one of them enjoyed at least some aspect of creating art at the museum. That experience, along with all of the various art programs I have been involved with through my museum internship, inspired me to take an even deeper look into arts integration in the elementary classroom and prompted my desire to make that the focus of my study by addressing how teachers perceive it.

### **Coding the Data**

With all this in mind, I went through a series of coding both my personal field notes and the one-on-one teacher interviews to analyze the qualitative data from this project. To begin, I read back through the journal entries and interview transcripts to give

myself a chance to see everything with a fresh perspective. This also allowed me to notice any interesting points or common themes that emerged throughout the interview responses and my own journaling. I looked first at the interview transcripts, organizing each respondent's answers by color coding them. Along with color coding, each of the main codes I identified throughout each interview were placed into categories on an excel sheet under which I pasted direct quotes from the interviews that expanded upon the idea that the code encompassed. I then followed the same process with my journal entries by finding the common themes, interesting or surprising ideas, and organizing them into an excel sheet. After I completed that coding and analyzing process for each set of data, I compiled the codes into the main themes that emerged. This entire process allowed me to identify main ideas, common thoughts among teachers, and surprising or conflicting thoughts.

### **Analyzing the Data**

To analyze the quantitative data from the questionnaire, I read closely through the responses to each of the fifteen questions. I then converted the data for each question into various graphs and charts to get the most complete picture of the teachers' thoughts about each prompt. This then allowed me to highlight the ideas that the teachers agreed with, disagreed with, or felt indifferent about. I was also able to compare the data from the questionnaire to the data from the interviews by comparing responses to similar questions. This also helped me gain a more full understanding of the teachers' perceptions, which is the ultimate goal of this project.



## **CHAPTER 4: The Findings**

During the process of coding and analyzing the data, several major trends emerged within and across all three sets of data. While each teacher I interviewed teaches a different grade level and has different levels of experience and knowledge when it comes to integrating art, they each had some similar thoughts and ideas about both the benefits and drawbacks of arts integration in the classroom. Similarly, the thoughts I recorded in my field notes showed the evolution of my perceptions of arts integration as a pre-service teacher; some of these thoughts aligned with and highlighted the thoughts of the teachers from the interviews, while there were also some conflicting ideas. In terms of the questionnaire, the responses brought up some convincing data to support and extend the ideas of the interviewed teachers.

In this section, I will discuss the trends and themes that emerged among all three sets of data. Within each major theme, I will discuss the teachers' reasoning and thoughts that supported their ideas, how the themes were interconnected among the forms of data, and any conflicting ideas that emerged.

These main themes are the following: Student Engagement and Motivation, Art as a Mode of Expressing Knowledge, Time Constraint, and Control.

## Student Engagement and Motivation

Of the common threads that arose throughout the collections of data, the concept of student engagement and motivation was one of the most emphasized and discussed topics. Throughout the interviews, the topic received the longest and most animated responses from the teachers, and the theme frequently arose throughout my field notes as well. Unanimously, the teachers, including myself, believed that their students' engagement and motivation levels were highly increased during the use of arts-integrated lessons. This belief was not only held by the teachers who participated in the one-on-one interviews, but also supported by the vast majority of teachers represented by the questionnaire. 92% of those teachers either strongly or somewhat agreed that they see many benefits, including motivational benefits, of arts integration for their students. This data is depicted in the Figure 1.

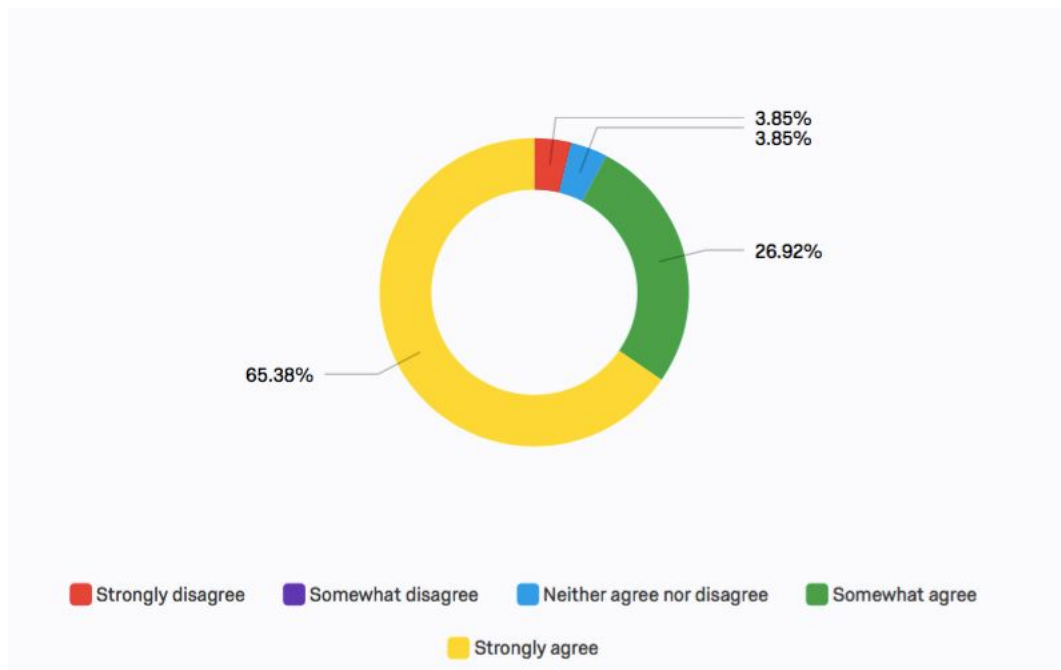


Figure 1. Teacher beliefs in strong cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational benefits of arts for students

### **Student Satisfaction in Art**

Part of the reason this belief is so strong could relate to the component of student engagement that focuses on students receiving satisfaction and enjoyment from the interactions they are having in the classroom. Mrs. Smith shared this idea during her interview and believed that her students “seem to just intrinsically enjoy the art so much” which makes them much more engaged in the material of the lesson. Mrs. Smith extended this idea, adding that “they have the incentive of knowing they might be able to tack on an art activity” to a lesson, which helps them do “some stuff that’s not as interesting to get to the interesting part.” Through my discussion with her, I found that the students’ enjoyment of and engagement with the art itself carries over into their engagement with the lesson and the material they are learning. This link between engagement with the arts and engagement with the academic material is pivotal because it highlights the way in which art can be the element that engages students in the lesson and ultimately engages them in learning the content.

I found that the students overall seemed to be much more engaged and interested in lessons when there was some aspect of art involved, whether it was a true integration of art in which the art held equal weight in the lesson or it was simply an art activity that was tacked on to a lesson. No matter which way art was a part of the class, the students genuinely seemed to enjoy it whenever they got to take part in it. I highlighted this in my field notes, saying, “they seemed to love getting to end the day with an art lesson” (February 13, 2019). The kids seemed more excited about doing an arts lesson as

compared to the type of worksheet they often do for their math lessons, and I touched on this in one of my field notes. I wrote:

Compared to worksheets that the students often had to do, they seemed much more excited and engaged in the lesson, even though it was in the afternoon (which is often a more difficult time for them) (October 22, 2018).

I also found that the students loved to be actively involved in learning through art via the opportunities to create and act out scenes or skits. This idea arose through several more of my journal entries in which I found that being physically active caused the students to be more engaged in the lesson because they enjoyed the art and the movement so much. In one of my field notes, I wrote, “The kids really seemed engaged during this lesson and enjoyed both illustrating their pictures and acting out the life cycle stages” (November 7, 2018). A similar entry states, “They love getting to be active and physically act out the meanings of the words” (October 3, 2018). and “they seemed to love getting to end the day with an art lesson” (February 13, 2019).

This perception of students enjoying the process of creating art was held by the other teachers I interviewed as well. I found that Mrs. Hamilton believes that working with art in a lesson “really helps them become a part of it and connect with it.” Mrs. Jones emphasized that she can always “see that they're excited” and that “they really love it” because art helps the students “keep an interest” in the material (Mrs. Jones). I found this idea expressed in my own field notes through phrases such as “their faces seemed to light up” (February 24, 2019), “the students were so happy to participate in the project” (November 14, 2018). If students are receiving satisfaction and joy from creating art

during lessons, that satisfaction will enhance their levels of engagement and influence them to learn the material with which the art is being integrated.

### **Student Attention Levels**

Another aspect of student engagement relates simply to the students' attention levels during class. When art is being integrated into the classroom, I found that the teachers noticed that students are often able to pay attention to a lesson for much longer. With the young K-2 students that they teach, this is incredibly important. Mrs. Smith stated that her students' "attention spans are longer" whenever she uses art in her classroom. I also found that she sees that her students are "more willing and more motivated" in class when the lesson is integrated with some kind of art component. Especially with her young kindergarten students, Mrs. Hamilton finds that when she integrates art, her students are "more focused and engaged in what they're doing instead of what their neighbor's doing," which ultimately allows the students to be more interactive with the material and increase their learning. Another strong statement that Mrs. Smith made was that "it's better if they can have art in every lesson" because the students are "more engaged" in the lesson and the material. Because students in the lower elementary grades are still so young, it is essential as a teacher to understand what will maintain students' attention levels long enough to get them more deeply engaged in the content of a lesson. According to the teachers, arts integration has served that purpose in each of their classrooms.

## **Relevance and Personal Connections**

Another important factor of student engagement stems from the how relevant the content is to their own lives. If students cannot make personal connections and understand how information will be relevant to their lives and their futures, then it may be hard for students to stay engaged and interested. A powerful thing about arts integration is that it can serve as the vehicle that helps students connect academic material to their personal lives. Put simply, one teacher notes that when art is used in her classroom, the students just “connect to it more” (Mrs. Hamilton). Mrs. Hamilton expanded upon this concept in saying that the students “get more engaged in what we're doing because these are our active learners.”

I also found that the students are ultimately “more successful in what they do” when they are able to use arts as a medium of connection to the academic material (Mrs. Hamilton). To touch on a specific example, Mrs. Smith discussed an arts-integrated social studies project she completed with her class earlier in the school year. She explained that to learn about the ideas of friendship and community, her class participated in creating a friendship quilt. She recalled this project as “a really beautiful thing” because of the way her students “really understood what friendship was”; the incorporation of the arts through the use of creating a quilt helped solidify that knowledge and make it hands-on for her students (Mrs. Smith).

Young elementary students can learn a lot by being active and hands-on in the things they do at school, and according to this teacher, art has become an influential way to help her students make those connections between content and self. Because students

are able to make those connections and find relevance in the content through art, it can have dramatic benefits on their overall learning experience and achievement in school.

### **Art as a Mode of Expressing Knowledge**

A unique theme that arose throughout the interview process was the idea of art serving as a mode of knowledge expression for students. This idea becomes particularly important when considering diverse groups of students and wide ranges of student achievement. Particularly with the youngest students who are still in the stages of learning to read and write, art can become the form of expression that students use to show their knowledge on a subject.

Mrs. Hamilton, who teaches a kindergarten class, emphasized this point heavily when she highlighted that “most of their writing starts out as their illustrations.’ While some kindergarten students may be able to form sentences and write down their ideas, others may still be in the early stages of writing and rely more on their illustrations to support their ideas. The reason this concept becomes so important is that art gives students an alternate route to express their understanding. If a class is given the task of writing a summary of a book they have just read so that the teacher can assess their comprehension, a student who is still learning to write may not be able to complete the task even if they could successfully comprehend the story. However, if art is integrated into the lesson and students are able to show comprehension through creating images that represent the main ideas of a story, they can demonstrate that they have still mastered a skill or concept. Not only does this apply to students of various academic levels, but it

also is important for English Language Learners or students with special needs. Mrs. Hamilton summed it up by saying that “they’re showing that they understand the story better...or the concept.”

This idea that led to discussions about differentiation and how art can be a natural way to accomplish that within a lesson. Mrs. Hamilton expressed, “when you give them that freedom” by allowing them to express their knowledge in an artistic way, “they’re automatically going to do that at their skill level.” Because of this, I found that art can be a medium that allows students to engage with the content at their own skill level. In a way, this can make differentiation an easier task for a teacher. She explained that notion by saying, “I don’t have to differentiate what I’m doing--it’s self-differentiated” (Mrs. Hamilton). So not only does art allow for inherent differentiation within a lesson, but it also gives students the opportunity to share their knowledge and ideas in new, non-traditional ways.

Aside from creating visual images, the teachers also emphasized how the use of drama or theater can allow students to express knowledge in non-traditional ways. Mrs. Hamilton highlighted this concept in relation to her students acting out the meanings of vocabulary words they learn, saying that when the students are “acting that out,” they are engaging with the material in a way that not only helps them learn the idea but also helps them express their understanding of it. Additionally, she explained that she uses the same method when teaching the difference between nouns, verbs, and adjectives to her students. She stated that her students “play the verb game where they’re acting out and learning the difference between words that you can act out and not,” which gives those



students a hands-on, experiential way to learn that concept and show their understanding of it (Mrs. Hamilton).

### **Time Constraints**

While many of the comments the teachers made were positive and supportive of the use of arts integration, the one thing that they seemed to view as a drawback was having time constraints. Concerning the preparation and planning work of creating arts-integrated lessons, they seemed to feel that they would integrate art more than they currently do if they had more time to prepare, plan, and get everything together for those types of lessons. According to the results of the questionnaire, nearly 90% of the teachers agreed to some extent that they do not believe they have enough time to teach art along with the other curriculum. This is a big majority, and emphasizes that time continues to be one of the biggest constraints that teachers feel in relation to their abilities to integrate art. Figure 2 depicts these results.

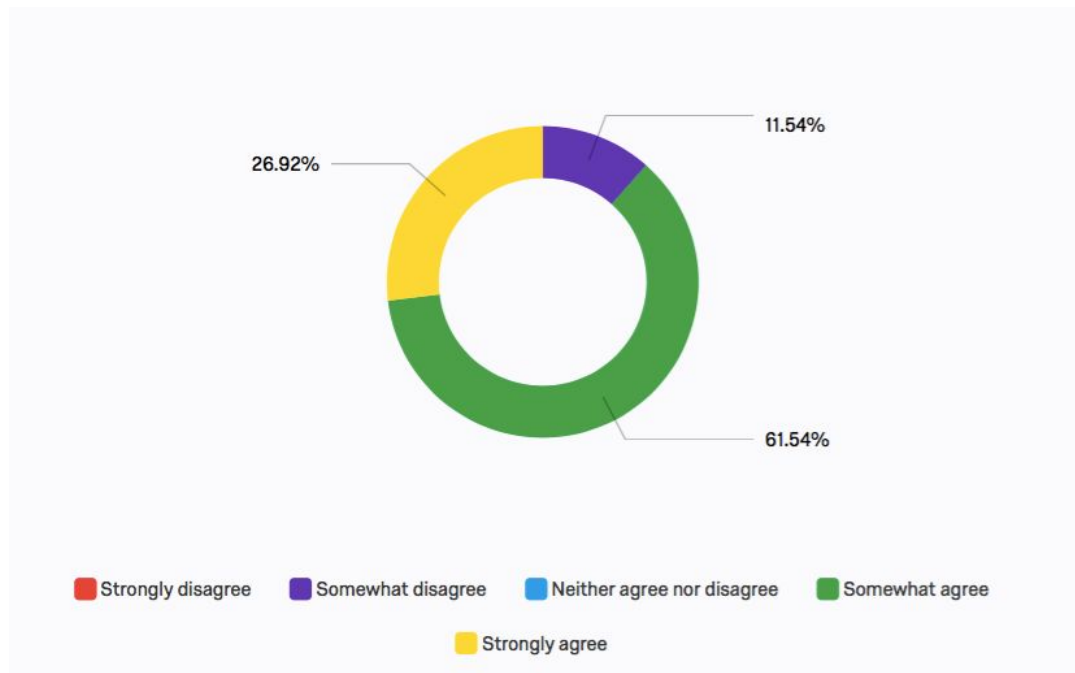


Figure 2. Teacher beliefs that they lack enough time to teach arts along with the other curriculum

I found that art is “not an everyday thing” for some teachers because they feel held back by the amount of time they have during the day and the amount of time needed to prep art lessons (Mrs. Smith). Mrs. Smith expressed that she is “limited in time” and therefore cannot integrate art into her class as often as she might like. She went on to explain this further, connecting it to the fact that external pressures to get students to certain levels in academic areas make it difficult for her to make time for other things in the classroom. She said, “In our society today we push children so much to be on a certain reading level and to be reading so many words per minute and to be on a certain math level, and so integrating arts in those becomes difficult...just with the time and prep of getting all that together” (Mrs. Smith).

Mrs. Hamilton perceived time as the biggest issue as well. When discussing this with her, she said, “time, time, time...that's the biggest issue” (Mrs. Hamilton). She also touched on the pressures to teach so much material each day and how that contributes to the limited time she has for incorporating other things. She said, “at the end of the day, sometimes it’s hard not to say, ‘Oh my goodness, we didn’t get this done,’ or ‘We didn’t get to that’” (Mrs. Hamilton). She also felt similarly to the other teachers in that she would be able to integrate art more frequently if she had more time to do so. The majority of teachers felt the same way, with 61% of the questionnaire respondents agreeing to some extent that they feel constrained by the demands of the curriculum they have to teach. This data is illustrated in the Figure 3.

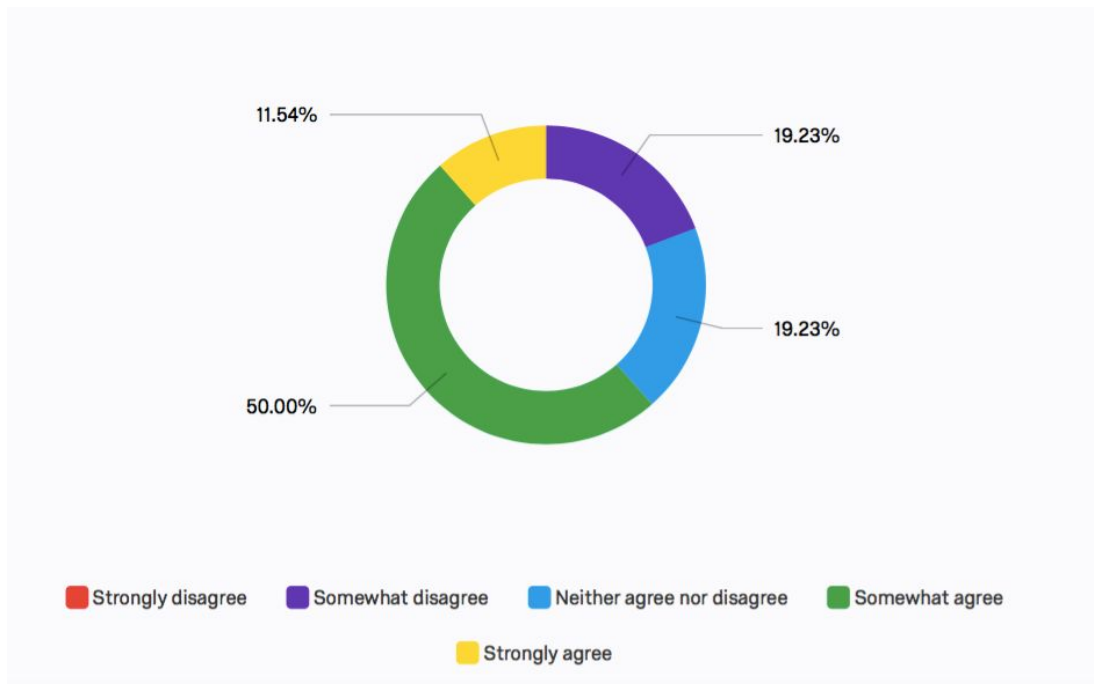


Figure 3. Teacher beliefs that they are constrained by the demands of the curriculum they must teach

Mrs. Jones agreed with the other interview participants in that time is the hardest issue to overcome. While her situation is different from the other teachers because she solely teaches art, she also teaches many more students overall and only works with them for small periods of time a week. Though her experience is a little different from the other teachers, when asked about the constraints she feels in teaching art, she answered with “Yes, time, time” (Mrs. Jones). With each class, she stated that “[they] only have 30 minutes” a week, “so time is a big one” as far as constraints and drawbacks go (Mrs. Jones).

### **Challenging the Time Constraints**

It was clear that the teachers as a whole perceived having time constraints as the biggest drawback to integrating art. However, there is a disconnect that appears because the teachers seemed to have strong beliefs in the benefits and impacts of arts integration for their students, yet a smaller percentage of teachers seemed to feel confident in their abilities to actually take it into practice. Also, my experiences and observations within the school and my classroom did not seem to uphold the perception of time constraints to the same degree. While I did notice that integrating art, or any other subject, takes some extra time and work during planning, I also found that it might not be as extreme of a constraint as it is made out to be by some teachers.

Part of the reason I felt this way was that some of the lessons used art as more of an add-on rather than as an equivalent part of the lesson’s content. I found that “the art was more of an addition to the lesson rather than an equal part of it” (October 1, 2018).

This idea of art as an addition connects to the idea of having time constraints due to the possible perceptions of teachers that it may be easier and less time consuming to add a craft at the end of a lesson rather than taking the time to form a deep integration between the art and the academics. Throughout my analysis of the field notes, I found that I often perceived that the art within a particular lesson had more potential than it actually reached. Specifically, I wrote:

I feel that we could have done a little more to integrate that art within the lesson. While the kids seemed to enjoy the craft and understand the material, it seemed like more of a last minute activity that was thrown in with the lesson at the end.  
(February 6, 2019)

Similarly, another comment I made was, “I think the math lesson we did today could have been very well integrated with art if we had created a plan for it earlier” (October 10, 2018). While this was not always the case and I did observe and teach some thoroughly-integrated lessons, there were several circumstances in which I found that art was added at the end of a lesson rather than integrated throughout.

### **Arts vs. Crafts**

When considering the idea of art as an additional activity rather than an integration of subject material, the difference between arts and crafts, and whether teachers understand the difference, is crucial to acknowledge. While art allows for freedom of expression and is a more open-ended and unstructured activity, crafts are

generally more specified and structured. While there are times and places for both, arts integration must include the element of freedom and exclude restrictions and limitations.

I found that most teachers tended to use crafts in their lessons more often than they used art. Mrs. Smith stated that she likes to “culminate an activity with some type of art,” and some of the lessons I observed at the school followed the same structure of using some type of craft at the end of a lesson. To highlight a specific example, a craft I wrote about in my field notes from October discussed students using construction paper to make jack-o-lanterns. I explained that each student got the same pumpkin shape to cut out, same colors of construction paper, and same shapes of teeth and mouths to cut out and paste onto their pumpkin (October 1, 2018). Though the students do enjoy making crafts, it causes them to lack a sense of freedom and autonomy over their work.

## **Control**

Stemming from the previous idea is the notion that art gives students control over what they do in the classroom. When I spoke to them, the teachers described the ways in which their students are able to express their creativity and imagination through the use of art. Mrs. Hamilton actually described this realization as her “biggest shift as a teacher.” She explained, “the more I give them the freedom to make those choices” and the more she acts “as a facilitator than, you know, the person who’s just spoon-feeding” them, the better it is for her students when it comes to their learning (Mrs. Hamilton). Part of the reason she thought that to be true is due to her belief that the students are eager to learn when they have control of what they are doing. She told me, “when you

make it their own activity...instead of me just cookie-cutting out some art activity...then they're more motivated to do that" (Mrs. Hamilton). Giving students that freedom to use art and explore their creativity is what allows the students to really make those connections between art and the academic content.

The art teacher agreed with these ideas strongly as well. While she typically has specific art lessons prepared for the students, she explained that sometimes they get to participate in free art centers where they have a selection of materials they can use to create anything. She said that "they really like to do free center...I have a center over there where they can use their imagination...and that just explodes creativity" (Mrs. Jones). She believes that they love this free time so much because it allows them to really explore and experience their creativity on a much deeper level than they could otherwise. She explained this, saying, "They get the 30 minutes without me, you know, saying, 'Okay, this is what we're gonna do today' (Mrs. Jones). Instead, they have a sense of control over their work and can create art in their own, unique ways as they are learning.

I found this idea of student control scattered frequently throughout my own field notes as well. In one entry, I wrote:

One student asked, 'Can we use any colors we want?' When I told him yes, he was very excited that he was able to create his pictures however he desired. It showed how excited the students get when they have the freedom to create things as they want to. (October 22, 2018)

Seeing a student have such joy over something as simple as choosing the colors he wanted to use for his art hints at the level of control he, and the other students, usually

feel during lessons. I discussed this idea in another entry which highlighted how theater and drama had been integrated in my class through my teaching of vocabulary words. In this entry, I said:

The kids get so excited when they know it is time for vocabulary because they all want turns to act out a word. They get so creative with the scenes they come up with in order to show their understanding of the words, and they express their disappointment if they do not get to participate in it that day. Today, this really reinforced my belief that the students truly enjoy participating in arts-integrated activities and has furthered my belief in it as a teaching practice. (October 3, 2018)

I made several other comments throughout the field notes that touched on the idea of the students having freedom and control. In one of these, I said:

The students often ask, “Can I use whatever colors I want?” or “Can I make it however I want?”, and when I tell them that they can create their picture or model or whatever it is in any way they want, they get so excited knowing they have the freedom to express their creativity and personality through the thing that they are making. (October 24, 2018).

Because the students have the control over creating their own scenes or their own pictures, they have that open-ended aspect of art that allows them to be creative and make the learning personal by connecting it to themselves.



## **Teacher Preparation and Professional Development**

A key element in understanding the teachers' perceptions of arts integration lies in understanding their perceptions of their own abilities as a teacher of the arts. Mrs. Jones, the art teacher, highlighted this idea during her discussion with me. She explained that general classroom teachers could have a more difficult time integrating arts if they were "not feeling comfortable" or "weren't prepared" (Mrs. Jones). Further, she said, "I can see somebody who's not real crafty or artsy... it might be a little more difficult" (Mrs. Jones). When asked about their perspectives of their own levels of creativity, I found that the teachers in general did not feel too strongly one way or the other. When considering the whole group of respondents, only half of them agreed to some extent that they feel highly creative, while the other half either did not agree or disagree, somewhat disagreed, or strongly disagreed. This data is depicted below in Figure 4.

While the teachers were split about the perspectives of their creativity levels, the majority of them did feel confident in their abilities to facilitate art activities in their classrooms, including visual art, dance, theater, and music. Nearly three-fourths (73%) of them somewhat or strongly agreed that they feel confident in their abilities to lead art lessons, with only 7% disagreeing. This reveals that most teachers feel that they are able to carry out art lessons in their classrooms. While this is a powerful statement in the support of arts integration, it once again leads back to the slight disconnect between the perspectives the teachers seem to have and their actions in the classroom. Figure 5 shows the teachers' responses regarding the confidence they feel in leading arts in the classroom.

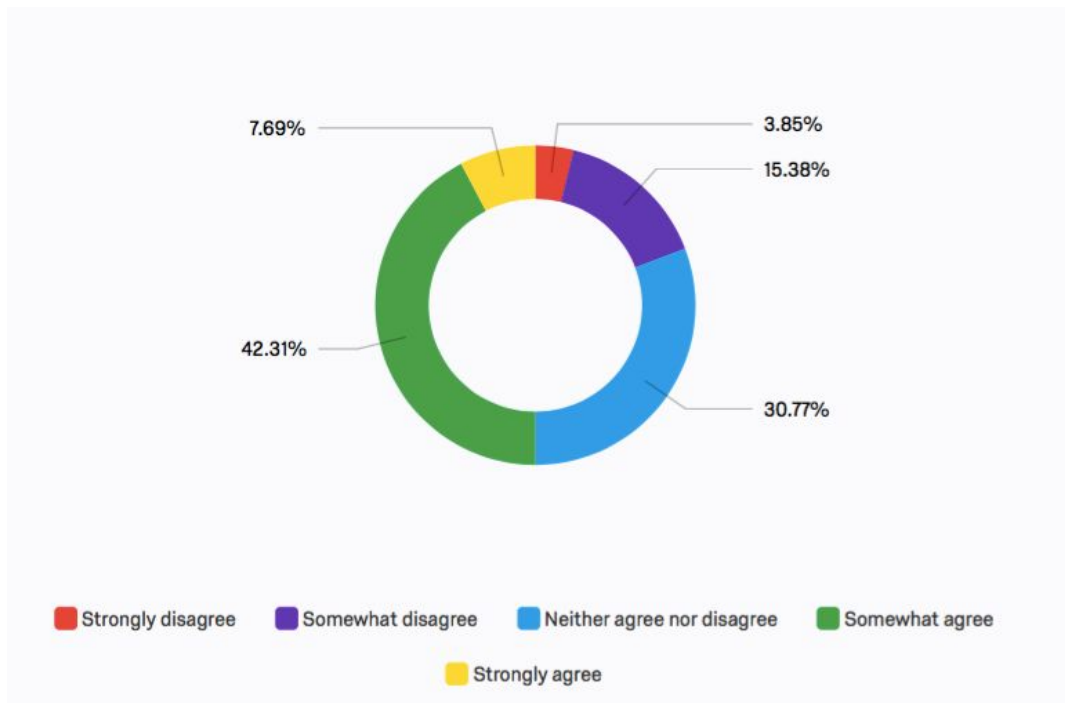


Figure 4. Teacher beliefs about being highly creative individuals

Another key aspect of being prepared to teach the arts is impacted heavily by the amount of instruction teachers receive during their teacher education programs. The amount of education they receive about integrating and teaching art can have a large influence on the amount of arts integration they tend to use. I found that the majority of teachers felt they received a moderate amount of instruction about integrating art, while 30% felt that they received little instruction on the topic. While 60% is a majority and another 7% felt they had an ample amount of instruction on the topic, it leaves about a third of the teachers did not feel that they received enough instruction to feel prepared for teaching the arts in their classrooms. 1 in 3 teachers not feeling that they received much instruction in the arts is a large enough number to question the amount of education in the

arts that teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities should be including.

Figure 6 depicts this data.

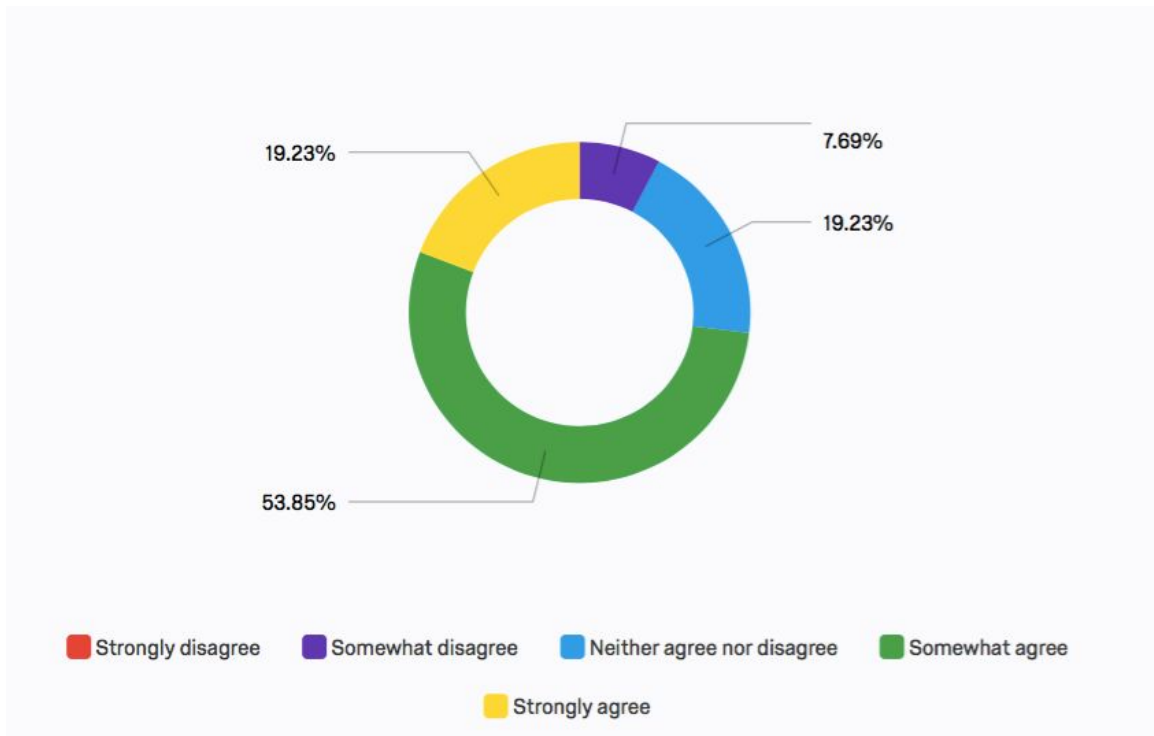


Figure 5. Teacher's levels of confidence to facilitate visual art, theater, music, and dance activities

Outside of college and teacher education programs, professional development workshops can allow teachers to learn more about practices and techniques to use in their classrooms. I found that there was a surprising lack of teachers who had attended or had the opportunity to attend professional development workshops focused on integrating the arts. A large majority of the teachers (73%) had not attended any workshops or other professional development programs related to the arts, leaving only 1 in 4 teachers who had experienced some sort of professional training in using the arts in the classroom. This

shows that a lack of preparation and instruction in how to integrate arts into the classroom could be a major, influential reason that teachers choose not to integrate art or not to integrate it often. Simply not having the knowledge base or being prepared to include art in the classroom could be what holds teachers back, and according to this data, nearly three-fourths of teachers have not had that professional development experience. This data is depicted in Figure 7.

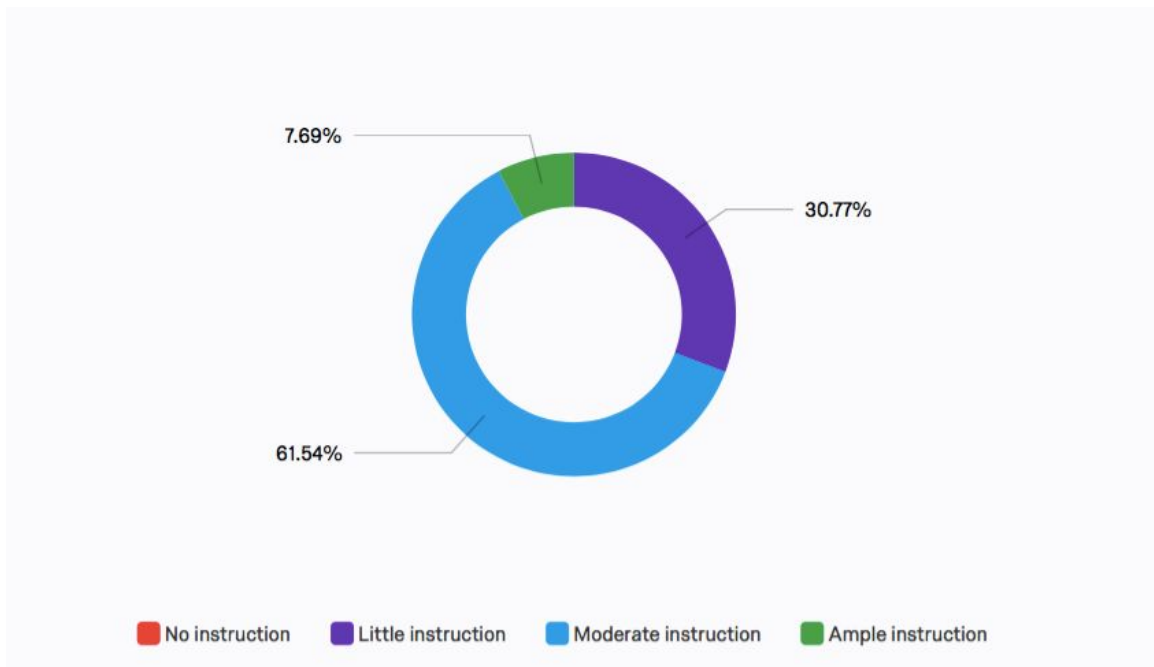


Figure 6. Amount of art instruction teachers received during their education programs

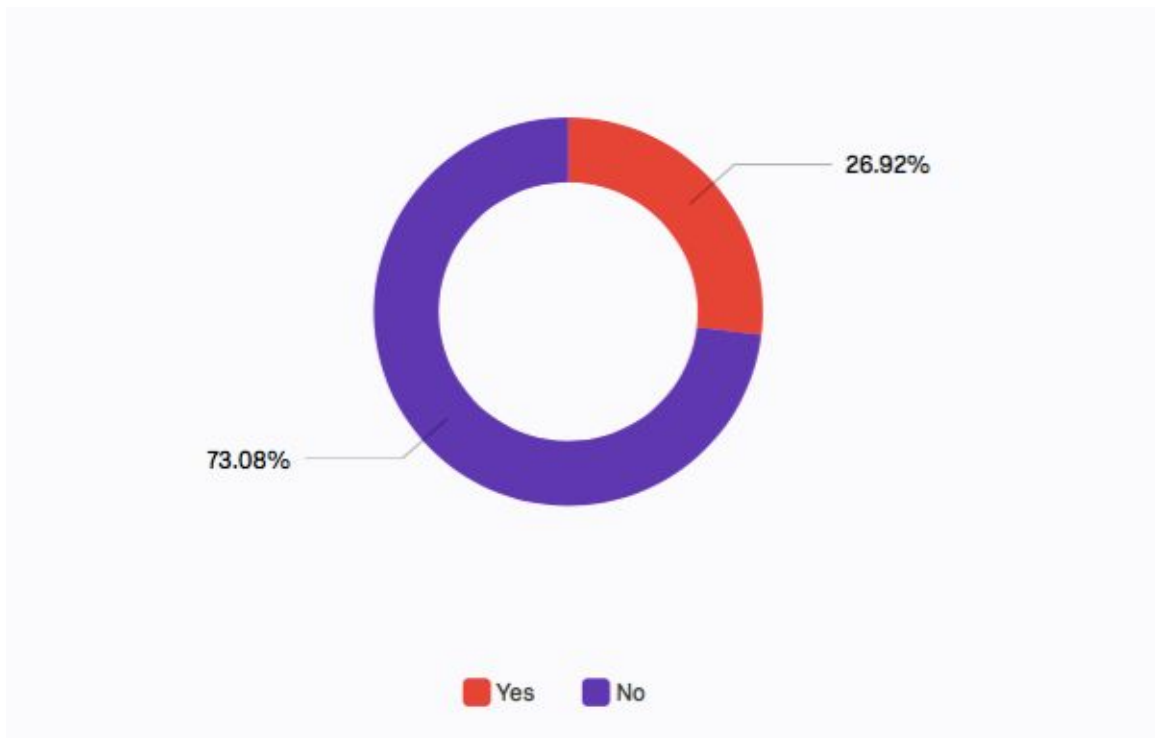


Figure 7. Teachers who have and have not attended professional development workshops on arts integration

### **Discipline and Behavior**

Through the data I collected, I found that the teachers believed that integrating art allowed them to have more control over their classrooms and fewer behavior problems. Each teacher I interviewed felt that they had less problems with behavior when integrating art and that they were able to better manage discipline in their classrooms. Mrs. Jones explained her reasoning for this, saying she felt that it was due to the fact that art is “something fun; it’s creative; it’s different.” She continued, “I can see [art] making them want to be on [they’re] best behavior because [they’re] gonna get to do this today” (Mrs. Jones).

Mrs. Hamilton supported the same ideas, saying, “It’s a lot easier to discipline and manage a classroom that’s engaged and really motivated in what it’s doing as opposed to the child who’s bored.” I noticed this appearing throughout my field notes as well. In one of them, I wrote:

Some of my students who seem to have more behavior problems in class seem to struggle with that less when we do art. When they are creating something during a lesson, they seem more focused on what they are making rather than letting their behavior get out of control. (November 5, 2018)

Integrating art into the classroom can be a positive way to discourage behavior issues and minimize the amount of time that the teacher has to spend handling disciplinary issues throughout the day.

Further supporting this notion, I found that the teachers did not view arts integration as a catalyst for their classrooms becoming too noisy or disruptive, which could cause behavior problems to arise. The largest percentage of respondents (46%) strongly disagreed with this idea on the questionnaire, while another 26% somewhat disagreed. Figure 8 shows this data. Knowing that the majority of teachers do not perceive arts as a stimulant for disruptive or problem behaviors further highlights the benefits that arts integration can have in the classroom, as well as the importance of teachers overcoming their perceived constraints so that they and their students can reap the benefits of arts integration.

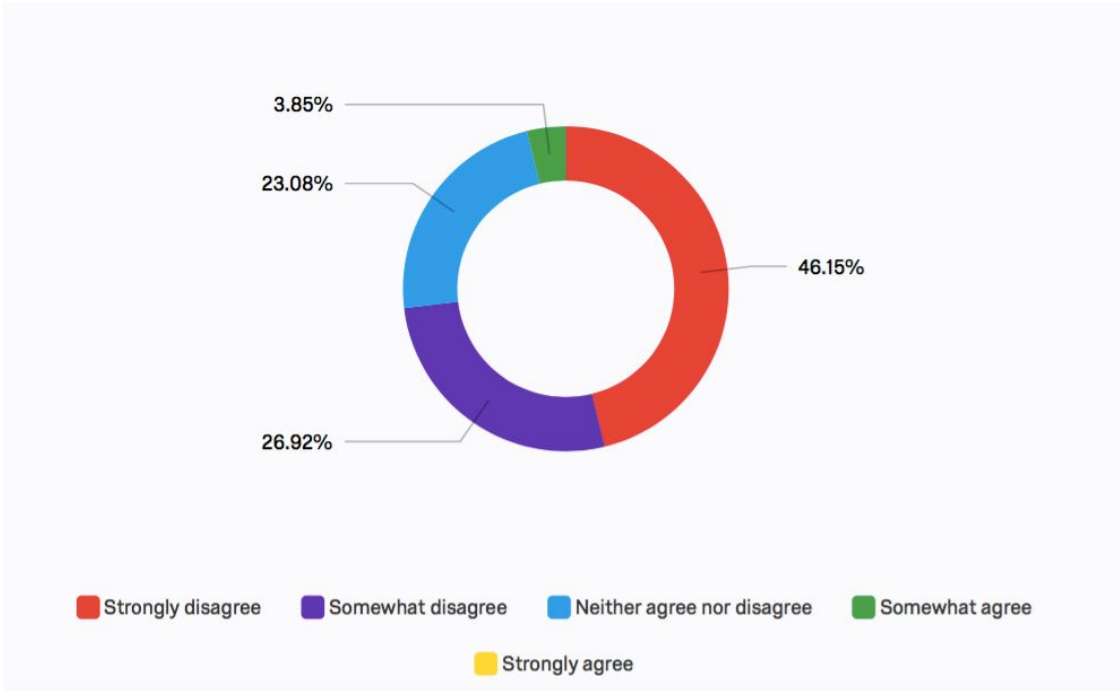


Figure 8. Teacher beliefs that art activities are too noisy or disruptive for the classroom

## **CHAPTER 5: Final Conclusions**

### **Limitations to Research**

The research for this thesis was conducted at one rural elementary school in Mississippi. It was limited to interviews by three in-service teachers at the school, and their years of teaching experience ranged from thirteen to twenty-four. In addition to a limited selection of teachers, each interview lasted only about 10 minutes, limiting the amount of information each teacher gave me. I was a participant in the research myself, but I am a pre-service teacher without any professional teaching experience. Aside from myself, the qualitative research did not reflect the opinions of any newer teachers with less than thirteen years of experience. While the survey did result in responses from twenty-six teachers with a range of teaching experience from one year to twenty-two years, the results were still confined to teachers from one school.

### **Applying the Results: How to Integrate Arts**

Throughout this project, I analyzed the perceptions of teachers in regards to the use of arts integration in their classrooms. I collected data on the thoughts and ideas of teachers with various amounts of teaching experience, education about teaching the arts, and experience in implementing the practice of arts integration. Additionally, I included my own perceptions as a pre-service teacher from my experiences student teaching a



kindergarten class. Based on the teacher perceptions I found, this study suggests several crucial ideas about the most effective ways for teachers to integrate the arts, particularly the ways that teachers can combat any common hesitations about arts integration and focus on the positive aspects of it that they view as valuable for their students.

To be able to integrate arts in an effective way, the teacher ultimately needs to be comfortable implementing those practices in the classroom. This being said, the frequency of arts integration may be different in every classroom. Factors such as preparation through education programs and professional development programs can have a large effect on the teachers' levels of comfort. Taking on arts integration a little bit at a time can allow teachers to slowly begin incorporating it into their lessons and curriculum without it becoming too overwhelming. Once a teacher gains more confidence in teaching art, it can become a more regular practice.

Teachers can also learn to integrate the arts in an effective way through attending programs or workshops that can help them develop their knowledge of art and understand the best methods for incorporating it. Because most teachers admitted that they had not attended any type of professional development programs about art in the classroom, it highlights an important way that teachers can learn to feel more prepared to integrate art within their lessons. Because the teachers I worked with ranged in experience from 1 year to 22 years, newer teachers and older teachers could also partner up to share ideas about arts integration and the best ways to use it.

Lastly, a crucial element of integrating art in the classroom requires overcoming any perceived constraints and putting forth the effort to incorporate art in the most

effective ways possible. While each teacher may have slightly different ideas about the time and energy it takes to integrate art, it is imperative that teachers do not ignore the powerful benefits of arts integration because it requires some additional effort in the planning and preparation. Whether the constraints teachers feel are related to time or to other concepts, learning to take the steps to overcome those constraints and fears is crucial in learning to be an effective user of arts integration.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Through the analysis of all of the results from this study, some important questions arose that highlight areas of need for future research related to arts integration. It was clear that the large majority of teachers believe in the benefits of arts integration, understand its value, and strive to use it in their classrooms to some extent. However, places of disconnect arose when comparing some of the teachers' thoughts and ideas with the observations I made about the actual implementation of arts in the classroom. Additionally, the results brought up some areas in which future research could be very beneficial for preparing teachers to teach the arts confidently and effectively.

### **The Question of Time**

One of the biggest concerns that came up through this study is the question of time and whether teachers feel they have enough of it to integrate the arts into their classrooms. This question becomes such a unique one when reviewing all the data. The teachers collectively felt that time was the biggest factor that held them back from

integrating art; however, they believed in all the cognitive, social, and emotional benefits that the arts can have for their students. So, if teachers believe strongly in the positive influences of the arts, then why do they not choose to make the time for it? Further research on this question and the perceptions of teachers on time and its restraints would provide some beneficial insight in this area.

### **Teacher Education Programs**

An area that would benefit from further research became apparent when considering the teachers' perceptions of their own preparation and abilities to teach the arts. A considerable amount of teachers did not feel that they had enough instruction on teaching the arts through their teacher education programs at colleges or universities. A similar amount also felt that they were not very creative individuals. Questioning the amount and type of instruction teacher candidates receive through their education programs could provide further information about this topic.

### **Professional Development**

Similarly, a large percentage of teachers had not attended any professional development workshops or programs focused on integrating the arts. This plays a part in a teacher's preparation to use art regularly. So, are these types of workshops not made available to teachers frequently enough? Are teachers simply choosing not to attend them? Future research addressing the topic of teacher perceptions of professional development in the arts would provide useful information in this area.

## **Conclusion**

Arts integration is much more than simply making crafts in the classroom from time to time. It requires conscious thought and effort from the teacher to elevate learning art to the same level as learning other subject material. However, when art and another subject become intertwined, there can be many powerful benefits for both the teachers and the students. The students become more motivated and engaged, find control over their work, express knowledge in unconventional ways, and make personal connections to the academic material. Teachers see fewer problems with behavior, maintain the attention of their students, and help their students develop and grow through the use of art within their lessons.

Understanding the perceptions of teachers in relation to the practice of arts integration reveals the personal thoughts and ideas of teachers that highlight both the positive aspects of art and areas that need improvement and further research. While every teacher will have unique viewpoints on arts integration in their individual classrooms and personal thoughts about how and when to incorporate it, there is an agreement among teachers that art has strong, positive influences on their students. This common belief must be nourished so that teachers' perceptions of arts integration can continue to evolve and students can reap the benefits of its role in their learning.

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## **Appendix A**

### Teacher Interview Questions:

1. How many years have you taught in total? At Lafayette Elementary School? What grade level do you currently teach?
2. Do you use any arts integration in your classroom currently? If so, explain.
3. Have you ever used arts integration in your classroom previously? Describe your experience.
4. Have you seen a difference in students' engagement levels when utilizing arts-integration versus no integration? If so, in what way?
5. When participating in an arts-integrated lesson, do you feel student motivation increased/decreased? In what way?
6. What do you feel is the strongest current motivation for you to use the arts in your teaching?
7. What do you feel would motivate you to use the arts more often?
8. Do you feel that there are constraints to integrating arts effectively? If so, what are they?
9. When teaching an arts-integrated lesson, do you have more or less discipline issues, on average? Why do you think that is?



## **Appendix B**

### Questionnaire Items:

1. I am currently a teacher at Lafayette Lower Elementary School in Oxford, MS.
2. How many years have you taught at Lafayette Elementary School?
3. How much experience with art activities did you engage in during your own schooling?
4. I feel that there are many students in my class who would especially benefit from more arts activities in the curriculum.
5. If any, how much instruction did you receive during your teacher education program or other program about how to integrate arts with other subjects in the classroom?
6. Have you attended, or had the opportunity to attend, professional development workshops focusing on incorporating art in the classroom?
7. In general, my school is supportive of innovative teaching approaches and I am free to use new teaching approaches in my classroom as I see fit.
8. I believe it is important for students to engage in arts activities, whether that is visual arts, dance, music, or theater.
9. I feel confident in my ability to facilitate visual art, theater, music, dance activities.
10. I believe that integrating art could have strong cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational benefits for my students.
11. I consider myself a highly creative person.
12. I feel constrained by the demands of the curriculum I have to teach.
13. I feel that I don't have enough time to teach the arts along with the rest of the curriculum.
14. I am concerned that art activities are too noisy or disruptive for the classroom.

15. To what extent have you integrated art into your classroom, either currently or in the past?