

## Towards a collaborative and interdisciplinary model of arts education

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When it is time for music or art class, the classroom teacher will say, 'Leave everything that you are doing for now and go to the music/ art room. Continue when you come back.' To the students, arts classes are a break from what they are doing in their classroom. The disconnectedness of the arts from other subject areas is thus evident from this scenario commonly found in American elementary schools. Arts educators often claim that the inclusion of arts in the curriculum can provide students with a well-rounded education. But can we achieve this goal with the arts being isolated from the rest of the curriculum?

A broaden view of arts education implies an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the arts. Music, art, dance and drama education should not be limited only to specialists. While arts educators can provide students with learning experiences that requires professional guidance in artistic skills, general teachers can also facilitate arts education by connecting the arts to other subjects. Thus, the roles played by specialists and generalists in arts education need to be differentiated yet mutually inclusive. In my educational project on Chinese music and culture (Chen-Hafteck, 2007), the school that involved teachers' collaboration was found to have the strongest impact on student learning. The general teacher taught facts about Chinese culture, illustrated by listening, singing and dancing activities. The music teacher supplemented with a study on Chinese music, singing Chinese songs and playing recorder. The art teacher was also involved, providing an investigation into Chinese painting.

Besides enhancing students' holistic learning of the curriculum, collaboration between arts and general teachers also means that the instructional time for the arts is not limited to once or twice weekly. The arts can be present in the classroom everyday! Furthermore, such collaboration can help justify the position of arts educators. They are no longer specialists hiding in their special room, but are known to be one of the key-players in student learning.

*Educating the Creative Mind* project at Kean University aims to increase the awareness of the significance of the arts in children's lives and education and to find ways to bring a well-rounded education to children. Funded by Kean University's Quality First Initiatives, it was inaugurated through an international conference in March 4-6, 2010 in which arts educators from around the world were brought together to discuss how to provide an arts-based education for all children. Next, plans are underway in organizing a Music, Arts and the Interdisciplinary Curriculum Institute for general and arts specialist teachers so that these teachers will be able to work together to implement an interdisciplinary curriculum in their classrooms. The work at the Institute will be followed by observations and support by interdisciplinary arts mentors. Documentation throughout the processes will also form an important part of project, providing data to demonstrate the effectiveness of such interdisciplinary curriculum.

Another ongoing research project that adapts an interdisciplinary approach to arts education is a cross-cultural singing project under the umbrella of *Advancing Interdisciplinary Research in Singing (AIRS) Project*. The *AIRS* project is a seven-year (2009-2016) major international research initiative funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada under the direction of Dr. Annabel Cohen at the University of Prince Edward Island. The objective of this study is to investigate whether the singing of multicultural songs will increase students' understandings of other cultures and thus, develop positive attitude towards people from other cultures. The project involves children from *four countries, namely Brazil, Canada, China and Kenya*. These children will receive lessons based on an interdisciplinary curriculum in which they will learn to sing some traditional songs from these four cultures in relation to their cultural backgrounds.

Educators who are interested in the *Educating the Creative Mind* project and *AIRS* project are welcome to collaborate and perhaps conduct further cross-cultural studies. Arts education needs to provide the meaningful artistic experiences that will enrich the lives of students. An interdisciplinary approach to arts education is a way to achieve this educational goal.

Reference:

Chen-Hafteck, L. (2007). In search of a motivating multicultural music experience: lessons learned from the Sounds of Silk project. *International Journal of Music Education*, 25, 3, 223-233.