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# A Magnified View: The Impact of Arts Integration in the ELA and Social Studies Classroom

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A Magnified View:

The Impact of Arts Integration in the ELA and Social Studies Classroom

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### Abstract

This qualitative research study explores the impact of arts integration in the ELA and social studies classroom. Through interdisciplinary lessons that weave music, theater, visual art, and movement with ELA and social studies content; this research explores the result of arts integration in the classroom. The fourth grade student participants in this study have contributed their ideas, understanding and reflections of the interdisciplinary ELA and social studies lessons through a collection of work samples, surveys, and interviews. Although the New York State Common Core State Standards have created a shift in content priorities and objectives for teachers, this study examines the impact on student learning through thoughtful arts integration.

### **Introduction**

A gentle chorus of tapping feet sends rhythm through the classroom. There is music and movement as the noticeable energy of 16 eager fourth grade students harmoniously engage in an anything but ordinary social studies lesson. It's not just the use of instruments and music that sets this instruction apart from others, but the integration of ELA, social studies and an interdisciplinary lens that truly ties together the content and learning objectives. Images like the ones highlighted above are typical everyday scenes in my fourth grade classroom. My students and their desires to learn suddenly come alive when my lessons incorporate movement, music, visual arts, and drama. This research explores arts integration in my fourth grade classroom and the impact on my students learning.

### **Research Problem**

The increased rigor and expectations established by the Common Core Learning Standards has created a shift in instructional planning. The focus for today's teacher is on objectives, standards, and assessments. Instructional classroom activities should be designed and implemented to foster the growth of students' skills across all academic areas. An interdisciplinary arts approach in the classroom seeks to find ways to increase engagement and student performance outcomes through lessons that incorporate music, theater, visual art, and movement while integrating content area instruction. Conley argues that the instructional activities utilized by teachers are created to teach to the test rather than to the students' needs (as cited in Hollenbeck & Saternus, 2013, p. 562). Professional development calls for an increase in excellence, expertise and success in the classroom while the number of students performing at below benchmark continues to grow. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress also known as the NAEP, 66 percent of all U.S. fourth graders scored "below

proficient" on the 2013 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading test, meaning that they are not reading at grade level (as cited in "Students First," n.d.) . The purpose of this research is to explore the implications for educators and students when interdisciplinary themes are implemented into ELA and social studies instruction.

### **Rationale**

According to one participant in a teacher focus group interview conducted by Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere and Stewart (2008), "If it's not a standard, then it's wasting our time. We are not encouraged to do things outside the standards". This quote highlights the dilemma faced by classroom teachers across our nation seeking to develop meaningful instruction for their students. These teachers encounter barriers and obstacles built around a hierarchical system of curriculum and content that dictates instruction in today's classroom. This has had an unfortunate effect on teachers' willingness to develop lessons that mirror their creativity and interests. For some educators, the innovative drive and passion that led them to the elementary classroom is being consumed by modules, annual professional evaluations, and the lack of opportunities for professional collaboration.

In my experiences as a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher I am inspired by the 16 creative young minds that animatedly enter my classroom each morning. Their innate inquisitive ideas and conversations compel me to build my instruction upon their interests along with my own personal and professional experiences. This study has significant professional and personal meaning to me as both a teacher and advocate for the arts. I am drawn to explore how the ELA and social studies lessons I develop for my students through interdisciplinary arts integration impact their learning. Could the expectations established for students to increase reading fluency, comprehension, and perform well on standardized testing begin with an exploration of

interdisciplinary curriculum in the classroom? In order to measure the effect of the instruction, this qualitative research reviews data including samples of student work, surveys, and observations of the interdisciplinary lessons taught to analyze growth of student literacy learning.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore the implications of interdisciplinary instruction in a fourth grade ELA and social studies classroom. Through thoughtful lesson planning that involves an analysis of content and interdisciplinary connections to music, visual art, movement and drama; this research analyzes the impact of the arts on students learning. During this research process I hoped to gain an understanding of how to develop meaningful interdisciplinary lesson planning that drives learning and engagement for my students.

### **Research Questions**

The primary question for this research is what happens when an interdisciplinary arts approach is added to the ELA and social studies classroom. Additional sub questions to support and guide my research include: what happens when I incorporate music, visual art, movement, and drama to my lessons?

### **Literature Review**

Experiencing literacy learning through an interdisciplinary lesson can take place in many forms. The research examined shares the story of educators, students, parents, and theorists that have also been intrigued with classroom instruction that incorporates arts integration. The literature discussed in this section highlights some of the themes that are relevant to my research questions and how my students' literacy learning is impacted through interdisciplinary instruction. Areas that connect to interdisciplinary themed lessons include instructional

constraints, lack of planning time, and limited resources and materials for professional and classroom support.

### **Instructional Constraints**

Research previously conducted highlights how teachers have balanced the demands emphasized for today's classroom (Boyle-Baise, Chu Hsu M, Johnson, Serriere, Stewart, 2008) along with the challenges of interdisciplinary instructional lesson planning (Reed & Groth, 2009) and incorporating interdisciplinary instructional strategies for the ELA and social studies classroom (Miller and Hopper, 2010).

In 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officials (CCSO) released the Common Core State Standards to create consistent academic expectations for all students in grades K-12. According to the CCSO (2010) the Common Core State Standards were developed "so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy". The very same year, New York State released its own standards (NYCCSS) to further bridge the gap between states' instructional goals for students in grades prek-12 (Engage NY, 2010). The intricate nature of the document itself can be simplified into strands that include reading, reading for information, reading foundational skills, writing, speaking and listening, and language. Within these strands specific anchor standards for each grade level are targeted to scaffold in complexity.

Although some argue that the standards help to provide much needed consistency and explicit expectations for teachers and students, others question the standards rigid format and lack of diverse instructional methods including arts integration. This research examines how thoughtful planning and development of interdisciplinary lessons impacts student literacy learning and instruction of NYCCSS ELA and social studies content.

In today's classroom with an emphasis on literacy learning through content-based instruction, teachers are focused on providing instruction that speaks to the curriculum. There is little time or resources available to provide teachers with support in developing lessons that incorporate interdisciplinary themes, maintain lesson objectives and yet engage students in creative learning. Research conducted by Boyle-Baise, Chu Hsu M, Johnson, Serriere & Stewart (2008) analyzes a case study in which the idea of "putting reading first" in elementary school over social studies curriculum is a priority. The article examines 13 classrooms throughout six Midwest elementary schools to collect a range of data including observations, field notes, and interviews. Boyle-Baise, Chu Hsu M, Johnson, Serriere & Stewart (2008) highlight that contrary to popular administrative and teaching opinion, the use of social studies texts to enhance ELA curriculum does not foster student understanding in both content areas. The findings determined that the integration of ELA and social studies was not purposeful, lacked enrichment, and placed social studies on the "backburner" (as cited in Boyle-Baise, Chu Hsu, Johnson, Serriere & Stewart, 2008, p. 246).

The research collected in the article by Boyle-Baise, Chu Hsu M, Johnson, Serriere & Stewart (2008) has relevant ideas that pertain to my research questions. My initial intent for developing the thought process behind my research was based on my own personal experiences as a 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. I struggle to incorporate meaningful social studies content that is pedagogically for social studies only. There is always a two-fold purpose when using the modules for planning. Although the text that I may use for ELA is historical non-fiction, the co-curricular connection does not typically extend both ways. Similar to the teachers referenced in by Boyle-Baise, Chu Hsu M, Johnson, Serriere & Stewart (2008), I also struggle to find social studies instructional materials. Additionally, this research provides examples of classroom



teachers that utilized traditional social studies pedagogies such as discussion, investigation, and dramatic role play rather than standard module questions and answer format. My research parallels this by seeking to analyze and explore the traditional classroom through a non-traditional interdisciplinary lens.

In this article research took place analyzing four, fifth grade classrooms that had incorporated arts integration into their science curriculum. The first science unit consisted of arts integrated instruction while the second was strictly content. Four teachers taught the same lessons to each of the four, fifth grade classes. Additionally, assessments were administered before, during, and after the units took place to monitor correlations between arts integration and student growth. The research findings demonstrated minimal initial results from assessments that took place during instruction. However, considerable improvement in retention of content was demonstrated after the students received arts integrated instruction. Significant improved results were demonstrated by students that had the lowest reading achievement. This study demonstrates the correlation between student retention and arts integrated instruction. Additionally, retention was observed to be most significant in the classrooms that incorporated arts integration with content.

A qualitative study conducted by Hardima, Rinne, Yarmolinskaya (2014) provides detailed accounts of how a group of teachers were able to develop and integrate arts into their science curriculum. The research included a range of specific examples of how arts integrated skills were combined with content instruction. Although this article lacks direct relevance to the ELA and social studies lens that I analyzed in my research, the assessments, data collection and variety of arts activities easily connect to my research design.

I greatly appreciated the incorporation of assessments and their findings that Hardima, Rinne, Yarmolinskaya (2014) provided in this article. In my classroom I believe that although it may sometimes be challenging, tracking student growth is essential for both student and teacher success. Developing assessments that capture student learning can help teachers to identify their student's strengths and struggles with specific skills. Like the assessments utilized by Hardima, Rinne, Yarmolinskaya (2014), evaluation of students' understanding should include a variety of methods including arts integration. Similarly, when initially integrating arts instruction into the classroom, analyzing all methods and variables can only help to enhance the research benefits on future instruction.

### **Lack of Planning Time**

One of the many challenges that I encounter when striving to incorporate interdisciplinary themes into my instruction, is a lack of planning time and resources. A study by Reed & Groth (2009) explored the impact of co-curricular instruction on learning when teachers are given the opportunity to plan effectively during team meetings. In the article, an urban middle school 6<sup>th</sup> grade team is selected to provide data and evidence of how co-curricular planning has impacted their students and teaching practices. The teachers identified on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade team were asked to create lessons that scaffold upon one another's content areas. According to Reed and Groth (2009) the teachers experienced success in their instruction and with their students when given the opportunity to plan collaboratively.

Reed and Groth (2009) provide data that also supports my research questions regarding interdisciplinary arts in the ELA and social studies classroom. Interviews were conducted of the participating 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers that discussed their perspectives of interdisciplinary instruction in their classrooms. Although the research conducted by Reed and Groth (2009) primarily focused

on co-curricular teaming, the idea of providing teachers with sound resources and sufficient professional development to allow them the opportunity to integrate the arts into their classroom is evident. The idea of interdisciplinary instruction and its potential impact on teachers and students has a correlation to my research. Additionally, Reed and Groth (2009) provide insight into the actual instructional planning process that a group of middle school teachers evoked upon in order to develop sound co-curricular lessons. Furthermore, this particular 6<sup>th</sup> grade middle school team received continuous professional support from an outside academic support team also looking to gain insight about the challenges encountered through the co-curricular planning model.

Obstacles for instructional planning are evident for all classroom teachers as highlighted by Reed and Groth (2009). However, the data analyzed in this article demonstrates the ability for teachers to develop sound interdisciplinary instruction when provided ample planning time and access to instructional materials.

Research conducted by Miller (2013) also provides insight into some of the challenges educators encounter when seeking to incorporate interdisciplinary instruction and planning. In particular Miller (2013) focused on interdisciplinary instructional challenges from the perspective of a general music teacher. The music teacher interviewed began a two year planning process with a first and fifth grade teacher to create a full year of music integrated curriculum. Initial concerns of the music and classroom teacher included if there would be continuous opportunities to integrate content. Furthermore, Miller also expressed concerns regarding the fifth grade students and if they would respond to the newly-designed interdisciplinary curriculum with the same enthusiasm as the first grade students.

Miller (2013) provided very detailed field notes that documented the reflections, interactions, and planning of the music teacher. Although the students Miller documented in the research were highly engaged and responded to the new lessons, the lack of planning time and materials available often hindered the content and execution of the lessons. The specific music and content that Miller did integrate helped to demonstrate that instructional interdisciplinary lessons can have varying results. These results depend on many variables including the skill, lesson format, student, and teacher.

The candid responses highlighted by Miller's research (2013) offer insight into the struggles she encountered when seeking to develop meaningful co-curricular instruction. Specifically, Miller (2013) shares her feelings of disappointment in her initial interdisciplinary collaborative efforts. Miller suggests that interdisciplinary planning is a foreign concept to many teachers and requires support and access to resources that can guide instruction.

### **Limited Resources**

Teaching strategies and tools for interdisciplinary instruction are not often observed in today's classrooms. A study conducted by Miller & Hopper (2010) focuses on the importance of visual art in public schools and how reading strategies can be integrated through the arts and content curriculum areas. In particular, this article highlights how various reading strategies that have demonstrated success for reading can also be used in a visual art classroom. The increased demands for test taking preparedness have had an effect on all teachers and the way they instruct their lessons. Miller and Hopper (2010) emphasize the "importance for all teachers (including art teachers) to develop the skills necessary" for students to be successful. Miller and Hopper (2010) highlight the relevancy between reading strategies and co-curricular instruction. According to

Miller and Hopper (2010) strategies such as journaling, summarizing, compare and contrast, and visuals have been successful at improving student comprehension and vocabulary.

Effective arts- related instructional strategies such as storytelling are also linked to interdisciplinary instruction and student literacy learning. Research by Groce (2004) analyzed storytelling and its impact in the ELA, social studies, science, and bilingual classrooms. Through qualitative research methods including interviews, observations, and field notes; research was conducted to analyze how teachers used storytelling across content areas and the impact that this had on student learning. Teachers in the research study participated in a one-day storytelling in-service. These teachers then took the ideas from the workshop and implemented them into their classrooms. The findings demonstrated increased student engagement and improved reading in ELA, science, and social studies.

The connection between storytelling and curriculum demonstrated by Groce (2004) and the teachers interviewed supports my interest in an interdisciplinary lens in the ELA and social studies classroom. Although each of the teachers interviewed by Groce (2004) was successful in implementing various storytelling elements into their lessons, none of the teachers integrated storytelling and math. Groce (2004) clearly expresses her disappointment in this and how there were several missed opportunities for meaningful integration. I appreciate the honesty in Groce's analysis of her findings. As a fourth grade teacher, this made me curious as to how I could possibly integrate storytelling into my own classroom. For example, I believe that teachers could find success with integrating storytelling into math through the use of word problems. Students often struggle with identifying the correct operation for in math word problems and key vocabulary associated with texts. Instruction that incorporates storytelling to help students

identify vocabulary, the operation, and how to solve could be key to developing student understanding.

### **Summary**

The research included in my literature review highlights a range of perspectives and themes associated with interdisciplinary instruction. The common themes addressed in the research including instructional constraints, lack of planning time, and limited resources and materials connect to the questions outlined in my research. If teachers are seeking to provide interdisciplinary instruction but met with the obstacles and themes outlined by previous research, they will be unable to develop quality instruction to meet the needs of their students. The common themes in the articles illustrate the instructional challenges that both teachers and students encounter with interdisciplinary arts every day.

### **Methodology**

#### **Context**

The purpose of this study is to examine what happens when an interdisciplinary arts approach is added to the ELA and social studies classroom. This research also explores what happens when music, visual art, movement, and drama are incorporated into my lessons and how this impacts my students' literacy learning. The research previously conducted on how teachers have met the demands emphasized for today's classroom (Boyle-Baise, Chu Hsu M, Johnson, Serriere, Stewart, 2008), the challenges of interdisciplinary instructional lesson planning (Reed & Groth, 2009), and interdisciplinary instructional strategies for the ELA and social studies classroom (Miller and Hopper, 2010) helps to further explore the implications of interdisciplinary instruction in the classroom. Through observations, surveys, and student work samples, I analyzed four of my students and their literacy learning through a series of ELA,

social studies, and focus lessons that incorporated arts integration. The data that I collected was analyzed and categorized based on the emerging themes and topics that were associated with interdisciplinary instruction and my students' literacy learning.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study included 4 students in my fourth grade elementary classroom during the 2015-2016 school year. The students were ages 9 and 10 years old. The elementary school is located in a rural farming community in Western New York. The socioeconomic background of the students in my classroom is diverse however; the student participants in this study are from middle class families. The ethnic background of the students in my class is 99% Caucasian and 1% Asian –American. The student participants have a range of academic strengths and needs across the 3 primary content areas; math, reading, and writing. The participants were selected based on their placement in my classroom and their willingness along with their parents' consent to participate in the study.

### **Setting**

The instructional lessons included in this study took place in my fourth grade classroom during ELA and social studies lesson periods. The interviews and work samples primarily took place during ELA and social studies instructional time. Occasionally, the interviews and work samples would carry over into other periods of the day including lunch, independent reading time, and recess to provide more time for the students to complete the tasks associated with the study. All interviews took place in my fourth grade classroom one-to one between the student and myself.

### **My Positionality as the Teacher Researcher**

As the primary researcher for this study I am a 36-year-old graduate student at The College of Brockport. I am enrolled in the Literacy B-12 program. Prior to enrolling in the Literacy B-12 Master's program, I was an undergraduate student also at The College at Brockport where I obtained my degree in Interdisciplinary Arts for Children with a Minor in Music in the spring of 2014. The 2015-2016 school year is my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of teaching and first year of teaching fourth grade. I have 16 energetic and curious young students in my classroom that I eagerly look forward to working with each day.

As the youngest of five children, I grew up in a family where the arts had a front row seat next to our education. My childhood was filled with experiences that revolved around music, theater, dance and visual art. I can remember sitting at our well-loved upright piano at the age of 3 and learning how to play songs like *Jingle Bells* and *Twinkle and Twinkle Little Star* by ear. Shortly after I turned 8 I began taking piano and clarinet lessons. My exploration of music continued with my mother enrolling me in private lessons at The Hochstein Music School for voice, clarinet, piano, and violin. My true passion as a child and as an adult today remains musical theater. I cherish the experiences I was given throughout my childhood to perform leading roles in musicals such as *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, and *Annie*.

Growing up in a small rural community the opportunities for me to explore my interests with musical theater were very limited. I believe that this fact has a strong correlation to why today I work to create opportunities for interactions with the arts with my students. My life has been enriched because of the arts. My passion and understanding of the potential rewarding impact that involvement with arts can have on the life of a child motivates me to incorporate interdisciplinary themes into my classroom instruction and has helped to establish the purpose for this study.



**Data Collection**

My personal knowledge of interdisciplinary arts in the elementary classroom has been enhanced through my research. I analyzed previously collected data that had been evaluated regarding similar interdisciplinary research topics. The research that I conducted prior to the interdisciplinary lessons I taught for this project allowed me to develop a greater understanding of the process and planning that previous educators have used to instruct arts related themes with content (Reed & Groth, 2009). I collected work samples and interviews from my four students to help demonstrate their understanding and reflections of the content taught through the interdisciplinary lessons. Arts integrated lessons were taught across the fourth grade American Revolution and Haudenosaunee or Iroquois ELA and social studies units of study. I developed a third focus lesson with the objective to share the story of the historic Woolworth's Lunch Counter Sit-In and its impact on the American people. While I conducted my research I kept anecdotal notes in a journal. Supplemental methods that I used to collect data included student interviews, classroom observations, field notes, student work samples (journals, written responses, drawings), and lesson plans.

**Procedures**

When conducting this study it was imperative for me to develop the interdisciplinary instructional lessons to coincide with the regular classroom content instruction. This would ensure the least amount of possible interference with the mandated curriculum and interruption to regular instruction time. Prior to beginning the study I explained to my students the purpose of the study, what their involvement would be, and how I would use the information that I collected.

During the American Revolution and Haudenosaunee units I collected data that included written work samples, surveys and observations. The observations included anecdotal notes taken during whole class, small group and independent interdisciplinary lesson and activity times. Additionally, during the focus lessons I also collected written work samples, visual art samples, and observations of the students during the activities.

### **Lesson 1**

The initial lesson for my research began with the fourth grade American Revolution unit. A gallery walk activity provided the arts integration and was the hook for introducing the unit. The gallery walk consisted of the students participating in an imaginary stroll through an art gallery to observe a collection of pictures and illustrations. The images highlighted the major events and themes that took place during the time period. Prior to beginning the lesson the students routinely recited the learning objectives for the class and were given directions and background information regarding a gallery walk and how to complete the task. I divided the students into 6 differentiated groups based on both academic and behavioral needs. “When you take a gallery walk you are quietly moving through an art museum” I said speaking softly to help establish the tone for our activity. I continued to explain to my students that in their gallery walk they were going to use a graphic organizer to help make connections and inferences to things they noticed and wondered about the pictures they saw and what their meanings might be. After the instructions were given the students quietly assembled at their assigned portraits and waited to receive a wink, smile and head nod that they could begin. Giggles of anticipation and wide eyes with eager looks of wonderment were met with even greater curiosity when the sound of a fife and drum gently echoed somewhere in the distance of the classroom. The gallery was now

complete with historically accurate music to help represent the feelings and emotions captured in the gallery walk images.

As the students tiptoed and shifted from one image to the next I carefully observed and wrote in my journal their varied reactions and responses to the images displayed. Some were earnestly enjoying every minute of the gallery walk; frantically writing down their thoughts about what they noticed and wondered. In particular I noticed the feet of Olivia and Sam rhythmically tapping to the beat of the snare drum while nodding their heads in time to the music. Abby and Caleb smiled and also wrote quickly as they passed from picture to picture with their group. As the students explored the images and illustration I carefully jotted down anecdotal notes of my observations during the activity.

## **Lesson 2**

The second lesson I developed to include arts integration during my class ELA and social studies instructional blocks focused on unfamiliar vocabulary and people from the American Revolution. The lesson was to focus on identifying who Patriots and Loyalists were and their distinct differences. Additionally, the lesson involved a role-playing activity where the students would learn about King George III and his significance to the Patriots and Loyalists as well as the American Revolution. Prior to beginning the lesson the students were asked to line up outside of the classroom door. They were each given \$500 dollars in play money, a vocabulary practice sheet, and then permitted to enter the room. I randomly selected a king and tax collector from the students to help with the activity. Once all of the students received their \$500 they were told by the tax collector that they would not be able to sit at their desks unless they paid the tax collector \$100. Grumbles and sighs of confusion rose up from the class as the tax collector walked from row to row excitedly collecting the \$100 payment from each student. The activity continued with

the tax collector and King George III seated contently on the kings throne or in this case at a side table in the classroom away from the rest of the students. To help establish the tone and create a dramatic setting the king was given a yellow construction paper crown and staff to help define and showcase his character. Coincidentally enough, when drawing the students names to see who would assist me in the activity Sam was selected to portray the king. As the lesson proceeded, I dramatically walked about the room to explain to my students seated at their desks the role of the tax collector, King George III and the plethora of taxes that the Patriots were required to pay on goods such as coffee, paper and glass. Occasionally a student yelled out a question or statement of disagreement with the idea that they as Patriots were being taxed based on their home in America and their objection to the laws of the king. As I paused in my lesson to instruct my students to fill in a definition on their vocabulary sheets I energetically yelled, "Before you can write down your vocabulary you must first pay the tax collector \$100 to use your pencil." The students roared in protest with anger at the thought of paying King George III another cent. Sam and the rest of the class laughed uncontrollably and smiled in their amusement. The lesson reached a high point when I asked the students to gather on the opposite side of the room as the king and tax collector. We discussed the land features and distance between England and the Americas and the hardships endured by the early colonial settlers. The students were all thoroughly engaged and excited to share their thoughts and connections to the Patriots, Loyalists and King George III. After the lesson activity and hook the students were provided with time to gather the definitions for the vocabulary words used in the activity while I quickly took notes about my observations during the lesson.

### **Lesson 3**

The final lesson that I developed to incorporate arts integration into my ELA and social studies instruction focused on a lesson of inquiry and exploration of the Greensboro Woolworth Lunch Counter Sit In. As Martin Luther King Jr. day approached, I knew that I wanted to create a lesson for my students that introduced them to a new perspective from the Civil Rights era through the use of meaningful arts integration. I called upon the mentor text *Sit In: How Four Friends Stood Up By Sitting Down* by Andrea and David Pinkney (2009). The book highlighted the events of the Greensboro Lunch Counter Sit In and their impact upon the struggle for equal rights across the nation during the 1960's. It was a Friday afternoon and the usual energy and commotion that accompany an elementary school classroom on the eve of a three-day holiday weekend had settled into my classroom. I gathered my students on the rectangular blue and black speckled rug and calmly nestled my chair into a snug spot between my smiling and curious students. I casually asked the students if they could remember why they had been given off from school the following Monday. A dozen or more hands quickly sprang up with an "of course we know" glance to accompany their intent to answer my question. I called on a few students to share their responses and then began to introduce my lesson about the young, brave African-American men that stood up for what they believed in one proud February day. My voice dropped low and soft to establish the tone and mood for my students of respect and significance. As we read through *Sit In*, the students quickly caught onto the poignant refrain "a doughnut and coffee with cream on the side" (A. & D. Pinkney, 2009). Many of the illustrations in the book were drawn in a circular pattern to demonstrate the cycle of segregation and the repetition and change that would result from the courage of the Greensboro young men. As I read, my students' eyes were wide in wonder and curiosity at the story, the people and the colorful depth of the illustrations. Not only were they being exposed to a party of history unknown to them before

now, they were reciting the words of peaceful resistance that changed America forever. Each of the students selected materials from the available construction paper, colored pencils, markers and crayons to complete their drawings. As the students began to create their artwork they could hear the sounds of Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech echoing through the classroom.

### **Trustworthiness**

Throughout this study I strived to maintain objective as the researcher allowing the data, evidence, and voices of my students to provide the foundation for my inquiry. I carefully planned my lessons, collected, and analyzed the information gathered through triangulation of the data. I developed questions and surveys that allowed the students to candidly express themselves without influence. As I analyzed and researched articles, I began to associate developing themes to my research based on the commonalities highlighted by the authors and their work. Throughout the data collection all of my students participated in the instructional lessons helping to ensure the validity of my four focus students' participation along with the rest of my class. During the American Revolution, Haudenosaunee units as well as the focus lesson I conducted frequent observations of my students across each both content areas to further explore emerging patterns with constant comparison methods (Glaser & Straus, 1967).

### **Analysis**

Over the course of approximately 6 weeks my fourth grade class engaged in a variety of arts integrated lessons and activities that were developed to support the current unit of study for ELA and social studies with arts infusion. After the conclusion of the unit and prepared focus lesson; I analyzed the work samples, observations, surveys and data from my findings. During this process I explored the patterns and themes within my data and developed a system of coding

to help further assess my evidence. The patterns of data weaved together an understanding of the impact that arts integration had on my students' literacy learning.

### **Preparing the Data**

Once the collection of data was complete, I began to analyze my findings looking for common patterns and themes among the samples. I carefully took notice of the similarities within the data and interesting points of discourse that the students shared about their experiences throughout the unit. The anecdotal notes that I gathered along with the interviews of my four focus students were then formally typed up into electronic text. I was very cautious when transcribing the notes to make sure that I included the complete dialogue and conversation that took place during my classroom observations and in the interviews themselves. The work samples of my students were categorized based on written work/visual art samples, classroom observations, and surveys. By grouping the data into categories I was to systematically review the results to further analyze my findings.

### **Exploring the Data**

After I had prepared all of the data, I was eager to explore the results of my research and truly begin to explore the thoughts and experiences of my students expressed through their work. According to Clark and Creswell (2015) exploratory analysis in qualitative research consists of the researcher reading through the data, recoding initial thoughts and ideas, and determining if more data should be collected. I read through my students' writing samples from my instructional lessons, reviewed their creative art work samples, and began to further observe patterns of commonality within their individual interview responses. Throughout this process, I began to develop a system of coding to help translate and categorize the results. The time and preparation

that I had thoughtfully devoted to gathering and analyzing my research data was slowly beginning to harmoniously come together.

### **Coding the Data**

Coding the data was the next step in the process of my research following the electronic transcription of my findings. I used a series of electronic highlighted colors to help group and sort the data. Additionally, I used open coding when cataloguing the data. According to Clark and Creswell (2015) open coding does not include pre-determined terms and allows the researcher to openly explore the ideas revealed in the data. Open codes that emerged were highlighted to assist in sorting the data. The initial coding included orange to indicate students' feelings about literacy, green for student responses that highlighted positive interactions with arts integrated lessons, and purple for student growth in instructional formative assessments. After transcribing the surveys and highlighting the open coding I developed, I included "I do not like" as an in vivo code (Clark & Creswell, 2015) to feature students' negative feelings towards any element of the arts integrated lessons that took place in ELA and/or social studies. The use of open and in vivo coding were included to help maintain an objective exploration of the data and to help further link together common themes and ideas.

### **Findings**

Clark and Creswell (2015) define a theme as being similar codes assembled together to form a main idea about the major patterns observed. Coding lead me to identify three major findings within the data. The findings included increased engagement through arts integration, elevated understanding of literacy based-skills, and heightened performance on formative literacy based instructional assessments. The discrete thoughts of Olivia, Abby, Sam, and Caleb became more clear.



**Finding Number One: Students Enjoy ELA and Social Studies**

My first finding was that my students do enjoy ELA and social studies. Data collection for my research began during my fourth grade classroom's American Revolution unit in ELA and social studies. When determining that my students do enjoy ELA and social studies, this particularly connected to the research explored by Boyle-Baise, Chu Hsu M, Johnson, Serriere & Stewart (2008) in that students' ability to make connections to ELA thrives through interdisciplinary learning. Throughout the first arts integrated lesson that incorporated a gallery walk, I took notes that reflected both my observations and the students' reactions during the lesson. Some of the notes I recorded in my journal of my Abby and Olivia in particular highlighted their feelings of enjoyment during the lessons. Abby stated that she liked "lessons where I get to listen to music and do art because it's fun." Olivia also said that she liked the ELA and social studies lessons that included arts integration because she "learns best" through hands-on arts integrated activities. When coding my notes to determine my findings, I noted 13 out of 16 of my students to have positive interactions while participating in the gallery walk. Included with those 13 students were the four focus students who also expressed interest in the arts integrated activity. Additionally, evidence I gathered during both the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> lessons including observations and survey questions also demonstrated patterns of student enjoyment and engagement of each of the arts integrated lessons and activities.

**Finding Number Two: Students Develop Stronger Informational Writing**

The second finding established was that my students were able to develop stronger informational writing. I observed my students to have increased awareness of unfamiliar words and phrases. The samples that I collected throughout each of the three lessons demonstrated that not only had my students met these expectations with text-based evidence and examples, they

were able to provide elaborate detailed descriptions and language to help support their writing. The writing samples of each of my four focus students highlighted that they were able to use 5 out of a given 5 new vocabulary words from the American Revolution. When incorporating the 5 vocabulary words, they were each able to demonstrate their understanding of the words meanings while making connections to their writing. As stated by Groce (2004), students that participate in arts integrated lessons are able to understand and utilize co-curricular instructional strategies. Not only were my students engaged throughout the ELA and social studies arts integrated lessons, they were able to successfully demonstrate their knowledge by providing text-based evidence in their TEeEeC paragraph responses. Additionally, open codes I developed from my field notes highlighted that my students were able to make multiple connections to new vocabulary introduced in the lessons. For example, both Sam and Caleb scored a 5 out of a total 5 points on a Revolutionary War vocabulary quiz. Boyle-Baise, Chu Hsu M, Johnson, Serriere & Stewart (2008) emphasize greater retention by students when literacy skills are taught through arts integration. The students' engagement and ability to demonstrate their understanding during each of the lessons discussion and informal journal prompt also support this finding.

### **Finding Number Three: Students Foster Empathy**

The third finding of my research was that my students fostered empathy. While using open codes (Clark & Creswell, 2015) I concluded that a pattern of concern and empathy among my students was an outcome of each the lessons. Observations I made of the drawings, anecdotal notes, and work samples (figures 3.1-3.4) of my students lead me to establish my research finding that my students had developed empathy through the arts integrated lessons. According to Reed & Groth (2009) when teachers are given time to develop and plan effective arts integrated lessons their instruction is enhanced which impacts student learning. The

conversations and ideas that were shared by my students throughout the three lessons taught were insightful. They allowed me to explore my students understanding of the lives of the people they were studying and the experiences they had endured. The observations I collected highlighted positive interactions with arts integration. Not only had my students grown in their understanding of the American Revolution and Civil Rights Movement, their empathy was a direct result of purposeful arts integrated planning and instruction (Reed & Groth, 2009).

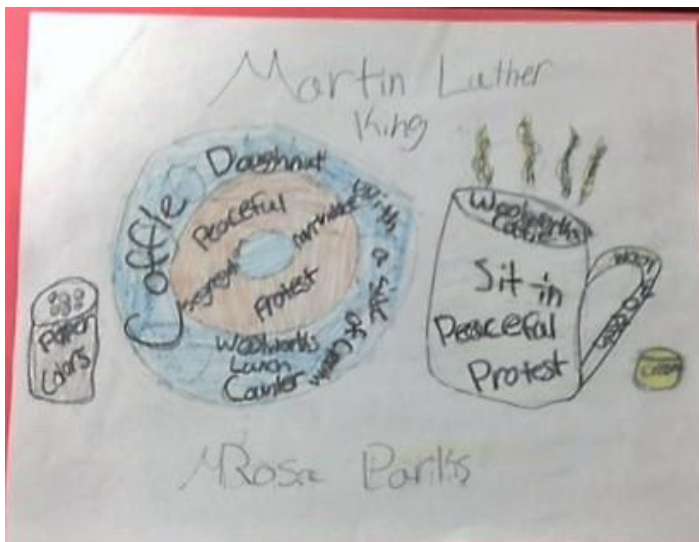


Figure 3.2 Abby's drawing lesson 3



Figure 3.3 Olivia's drawing lesson 3



Figure 3.4 Caleb's drawing lesson 3

### **Validating the Findings**

I was able to check the validity of my findings through triangulation of the data I collected throughout the lessons. Clark and Creswell (2015) state that validating findings includes using strategies to ensure accuracy and credibility. During this process I carefully examined the data that had been coded and found links to connect the information gathered to the themes developed from the data. For example, I used a rubric to assess the instructional objectives when completing a formative written response about the significance of Declaration of Independence. Olivia, Abby, Sam and Caleb were all successful in completing the lesson objectives which included the incorporation of text evidence and the use of a TEEEC. This allowed me to triangulate this specific data with accuracy and precise guidelines. Additionally, these findings further connect to the elevated understanding of literacy based skills established for my research.

### **Discussion**

#### **Conclusions**

My research provided me with the following conclusions: a) my students enjoy ELA and social studies, b) interdisciplinary lessons lead to stronger informational writing and c) students foster empathy when interdisciplinary lessons include critical-thinking mentor texts.

#### **Interdisciplinary Lessons Lead to Stronger Informational Writing**

First I can conclude that my students truly do enjoy ELA and social studies. The instructional content of the American Revolution and Haudenosaunee Units captivated the students' attention. Their curiosity and drive to understand the people of our past thrived throughout these units. I found my students eager to engage in the lessons for these units and that they were drawn to the arts integrated instructional materials and activities.

### **Students Develop Stronger Informational Writing**

Secondly, I can conclude that my students developed stronger informational writing. The formative assessments that I incorporated throughout the ELA and social studies arts integrated lessons provided the students with the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of the content learning objectives. Students were given various writing prompts based on the content and then given the task of developing a TEEeC to demonstrate their understanding. My students were successful with completing the tasks and developing strong text-based informational paragraph writing. Additionally, their responses often included elaborate details and language that helped to support their writing and ability to communicate their thinking.

### **Students Foster Empathy**

The final conclusion I was able to determine was that arts integrated lessons that incorporate critical mentor texts allowed my students to foster empathy. In particular, the Woolworth's Lunch Counter Sit In focus lesson highlighted the plight of African-American's during the Civil Rights Movement and the oppression that they endured. My students were drawn to the repetitive refrain of *Sit In* (A. & D. Pinkney, 2009) and the vivid illustrations that spoke about the lives of the American people during this era. The dialogue and conversations that took place in the classroom following the read aloud highlighted my student's questions, concerns, and desire to understand such a tumultuous part of their history. The visual art activity

allowed the students to further express their understandings and desire to correct the wrongs of the past and create a better tomorrow.

### **Summary of Conclusions**

I can conclude that my students truly enjoyed the interdisciplinary ELA and social studies lessons. Additionally, my students fostered empathy for others through the focus lesson. The American Revolution and Haudenosaunee units were particularly challenging topics as they incorporated a variety of scaffolded information including important dates, people, and events. Their ability to analyze and make connections to the complex information in these units through oral, written and artistic expression was evident. Additionally, my students' understanding of injustice and civil disobedience was demonstrated through their conversations and illustrations of *Sit In* and the personal impact this story had on their life.

### **Implications**

The conclusions developed from my research lead me to establish the following implications for my students and myself. The implications are that a) students should be exposed to arts integrated activities that incorporate meaningful critical literacy instruction and b) teachers require ample planning time and support to develop interdisciplinary lessons.

### **Students Should be Exposed to Arts Integrated Activities that Incorporate Critical Literacy**

#### **Instruction**

Throughout my research I found myself always looking back at the curriculum and how it was the focal point of my instruction. Many teachers allow the curriculum to drive their instruction and feel that their lessons are limited due to the constraints of content. More often than not I have also felt this same burden when developing lessons. This research provided me

with the opportunity to embrace the ELA and social studies curriculum for fourth grade and tailor it to meet the needs of my students through an interdisciplinary lens.

Critical literacy texts can be utilized in a variety of ways for classroom instruction. Texts that teach and expose students to historical events, places, and people through reading help to foster empathy and understanding of diverse perspectives. This was particularly evident during the focus lesson that highlighted the Greensboro Lunch Counter Sit In. Not only did my students engage with the text, their questioning and participation in our class dialogue regarding the text demonstrated concern and compassion. The illustrations they created were thoughtful and further evoked discussion about history, culture and how they can impact change.

Teachers should strive to incorporate integrated arts activities that integrate critical literacy texts. When seeking to find meaningful ways to teach content, critical texts can also help to teach character and empathy.

### **Teachers Require Ample Planning Time and Support to Develop interdisciplinary Lessons**

When seeking to incorporate arts integrated lessons, one of the greatest obstacles I encountered was the lack of planning time and support. For teachers, school days rarely consist of time for creative instructional planning. Scheduled planning itself is often interrupted by impromptu meetings or unexpected meetings. Planning time that provides teachers with professional resources and support for interdisciplinary planning should occur regularly to encourage teachers to explore opportunities for arts-related classroom instruction.

When developing interdisciplinary lessons I find that my greatest support is online resources. My lessons for arts integration begin as an idea that typically require a gentle hand of support with instructional materials, visuals, and content-based connections. Although I am usually successful with finding the appropriate resources to develop my arts integrated lessons,



time for creative collaboration with my peers would yield rewarding results. Professional development for teachers that speaks to the benefits of collaborative arts integrated planning would be a powerful catalyst to help initiate a new understanding of the impact that arts integration has on students learning.

### **Limitations**

Limitations to this study include instructional constraints and demographics. Additionally there are limitations due to the research setting as the study took place in only one classroom with only one teacher. The paper is written from my perspective and includes data collected from a single fourth grade classroom.

### **Future Research**

Future research that would be intriguing to explore includes the impact of arts integration in a variety of classroom settings. Although my students were engaged and experienced literacy growth through the arts integrated lessons taught, the impact across other classroom populations is unknown. I am eager to explore this topic in primary, secondary and urban classroom settings to see how students in these environments would be affected.

Other research ideas to consider regarding arts integration is how collaboration between teachers would impact interdisciplinary lessons and literacy learning. I enjoy the collaboration I have with my grade level team and interested to explore how creative planning would benefit my students and improve my classroom instruction.

### **Overall Significance of This Study**

As a first year, fourth grade teacher that is passionate about arts education, I found this study to be very rewarding. The activities that I developed through the ELA and social studies content challenged me to explore my creativity within the constraints of curriculum. Through my

research I learned about myself and my students. By providing my students with the opportunity to experience the arts through content, I realized that the rewards of arts integration can begin with a creative idea and a compelling book.

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