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Building Artistic Connections

Integrating the performing arts requires enthusiasm, motivation, time, commitment, planning, and scheduling, but implementation is both challenging and rewarding. Although it may seem that you are the only one invested in this project when you begin, it is noteworthy to recognize how you can find and utilize support systems for the performing arts within the school, home, and community settings.

This chapter discusses various resources and references for building artistic connections within the school, among families, and within the community settings. The idea here is that while the process of integrating the performing arts may begin within one classroom, these experiences can be augmented by fostering relationships with other individuals. This includes grade-level teachers, administrators, arts specialists, family members and siblings who are invested in these projects, and arts organizations and performance venues in neighboring communities.

You may be fortunate to have an abundance of resources and materials, an administration that supports the performing arts, and a school rich with artistic experiences for students. Alternatively, you may find that your experiences resonate with those of the thousands of teachers whose settings are a stark contrast to such an ideal—a place where funding is scarce, resources are depleted, and

a stronger focus is placed on successful test taking than on engaging in the creative process.

The ideas presented throughout this chapter are broad in scope, recognizing that every school and community setting is unique. Building artistic connections is a long-term process, one that can transform integrated performing arts activities from individual events into collaborative experiences.

School Connections

Elliott Eisner brilliantly noted that “The arts’ position in the school curriculum symbolizes to the young what adults believe is important” (Eisner, 1999). When music, theater, dance, and musical theater permeate the entire school, students are more likely to believe that these activities are a valued and meaningful part of their educational experiences.

In my years of visiting, observing, and speaking with teachers about integrating the performing arts, I have consistently found that the school climate can profoundly impact any integrated arts activities. In some settings, the entire school engages in arts integration, adding these experiences as a necessary and vital part of the curriculum. Contrastingly, a teacher who wants to bring the performing arts into the classroom finds even greater challenges when the administration is unsupportive or other teachers do not find value in these experiences.

Connecting With Teachers

The best place to begin is often with the other teachers in the school. Whether or not teachers are currently integrating the arts into their own classrooms, it is worthwhile to have conversations during grade-level meetings to discuss ideas for creating and implementing lessons that would involve more than one classroom. Teachers’ familiarity with their own curriculum and the activities taking place in, for example, the “other first-grade classroom” marks a logical first step in bridging connections outside of one classroom setting.

Grade-level discussions also allow for a shared platform for designing lessons. Teachers in the same grade levels are best aware of the challenges their colleagues face, the strengths of their position, and the topics that are mandated for the curriculum. One idea is to take a series of relevant performing arts lessons and implement them

one class at a time. Another suggestion is to use the lessons as a starting point for creating a gradewide unit centered on an appropriate theme and designed by all the teachers as a collaborative project.

Similarly, many teachers have shared with me how the richest discussions come from conversations with teachers in other grade levels. While the specific learning objectives or assessments are not necessarily applicable, the talking points and ideas serve as a foundation for building one's own repertoire of songs, scripts, and dances; finding new ways to collaborate (perhaps by engaging older students as mentors to younger ones); and integrating the performing arts.

Connecting With Arts Specialists

Observation hours are required for an arts methods course that I teach every quarter, and a student once shared with me her excitement at observing a music teacher in a preschool. In a majority of preschool and kindergarten classrooms, the classroom teacher is responsible for integrating the arts (and this is often expected as part of this grade-level curriculum). My student was thrilled at the prospect that the preschoolers in this unique school setting were provided with a 30-minute music class once a week *with a music teacher*—it wasn't much, she said, but it was clear the children loved it and looked forward to it.

It is no secret that when a school has financial constraints (as many do today), arts programs are the first to be eliminated, perhaps because they are perceived as lacking value or as not being a necessary component of education. When this unfortunate and common occurrence takes place, the arts specialists—music, theater, dance, and visual arts teachers—are, too, removed from the schools.

In my conversations with arts specialists who are teaching in major cities around the United States, many have described their frustrations and feelings of alienation from the schools they work in, being perceived as valuable only because they provide free time for other teachers (when the arts specialists are working with those teachers' students), and feeling that their work with children in the arts is not considered valuable. Drawing upon these viewpoints, it becomes evident that it is important to consider how teachers who are beginning to integrate the performing arts into their own classrooms feel the same way—isolated and overwhelmed with the task at hand. Connecting with the music, theater, or dance teacher in a school is a wonderful way to build a natural collaboration, to draw upon the arts specialist's expertise and resources to bring the performing arts into your own classroom.

Connecting With Schools

The best place to begin building any artistic connection is within your own school setting, to move beyond one classroom, to utilize the resources around you, and to collaborate with the teachers and arts specialists who can help establish a learning environment that is rich with integrated performing arts experiences.

Do you have an afterschool program for students who want to participate in the arts, or for children who are at a high risk for academic failure? What are the characteristics of your program that are successful? What are the weaknesses? Perhaps most important, are there neighboring schools with which you can collaborate to build these programs and provide more resources and venues for the students involved? Most often, afterschool programs with wonderful goals and visions struggle because they are led by one teacher with limited resources and supplies. Going out into the community to find similar programs is a great way to start to augment an existing program and build connections with other teachers and students. An added benefit is shared resources and materials.

A unique, collaborative initiative by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, brought musical theater into two middle schools. Through this program, teachers, teaching artists, and students collaborated to present productions of *Aladdin, Jr.* and *Mulan, Jr.* with the students as the performers in both shows. Importantly, both middle schools performed both productions, with each school taking turns using the same sets, staging, props, accessories, scripts, and music.

How might a similar collaboration take place in your own setting? What elementary, middle, or secondary schools are located nearby? One aspect to consider is that a benefit of connecting with elementary charter or private schools is that these settings often have designated funding for arts programs for students. Tapping into these resources is a way to find support for your own activities. Similarly, middle and secondary schools also have arts programs (both during and after school) for students, and connecting with teachers in these settings can provide you with access to a variety of costumes, props, scenery, music, and scripts. In some instances, older students may also assume leadership roles by assisting with your elementary students' productions.

Neighboring universities and colleges with music, theater, dance, or performing arts programs are also valuable resources for your own activities. Professors are often eager to connect with schools, to build programs, and explore partnership opportunities. In addition to borrowing materials, consider requesting minimal

use of space for performances (either informal or formal), as institutions of higher education often have wonderful venues for sharing artistic experiences.

Home Connections

It was two weeks before our big spring musical revue, and the costumes that had been specially ordered for this performance were backordered and delayed. I was informed that the intricately designed outfits would be shipped and delivered a week after our performance. I was panicking, and the students were upset. I sent out a letter to parents asking if they knew of any resources or contacts, and I called neighboring schools and organizations for supplies.

The following morning, I received a call from a mother of one of my students, who stated she read my letter and would be more than happy to assist our class with costumes. She was, in fact, the lead costume designer for a local children's theater, and while some of the costumes needed to be made, several could be borrowed from the theater's existing wardrobe. The costumes she obtained for us were glorious, and I was able to negotiate a refund for the ones that shipped late. I could not have asked for a better ending to this story.

Connecting With Families

Families are a vital resource for any school and program. Just as I learned, you never know if a parent, family member, relative, or sibling has access to valuable resources. In the situation described in the above vignette, not only did I build a connection with the parent (who received full recognition for her work), but I also made connections with the children's theater, from which my students often borrowed costumes and where they watched live performances.

As a music teacher, I often contend that my students are my greatest source of building a repertoire. Borrowing the music and songs that students listen to at home is a simple way to build a home-school connection. Invite parents into the classroom to observe and experience performing arts activities with you and your students. Stories abound in the news of schools that shut down arts programs and parents who joined with teachers to protest these eliminations and save the arts for the students. Firsthand participation is much more effective than just sharing stories through e-mails

and newsletters. Involving families will garner much needed support for your activities and programs.

Parents, siblings, and relatives may also work or be affiliated with organizations and companies that can sponsor, donate to, or support your programs. Funding from these sources is more easily obtained than grants or donations from government organizations. The added benefit is the personal connection forged with your students' families.

Connecting as Volunteers

Integrating the performing arts includes many different components, from planning to the actual implementation of a project—particularly for projects that are large in scale and performance. It is logical to gather volunteers and support from students' families and from staff and administration throughout the school. In fact, many community theaters actually require parental involvement for a child to be cast in a show. Utilize family members to help implement any activity, lesson, or larger production. Create and distribute a list of activities to encourage parents to sign up for committees throughout the year. Such a list might include service on committees for music, makeup, costumes, choreography, tickets, seating, refreshments, instruments, lighting, and sound. Create a list of what *you* need most.

You will be surprised at how involved family members will want to be with the performing arts activities you introduce. These settings are often an outlet for the untapped performer to be a part of a show, to bring in instruments, or to dance with the class. In one amazing example, the father of one of my students invited my students to record a compilation of songs as a class project in his small, in-home recording studio. This wonderful opportunity may never have presented itself if I did not take the initiative to ask parents about their interests in becoming involved in our performing arts activities.

Community Connections

One of the oldest beliefs in educational philosophy is that the community plays a large role in shaping, influencing, and ultimately supporting the schools. Organizations and artists, educational researchers and scholars, are all charged with supporting schools, collaborating with teachers, and engaging students in unique, hands-on experiences. With that in mind, how can you turn to the organizations and individuals within your own community for resources that will shape music, theater, dance, and musical theater in your classroom?

Connecting With Arts Organizations

A large number of performing arts centers and arts organizations have dedicated educational outreach programs focused on connecting with students, teachers, and schools. In fact, many sustained integrated arts programs and projects are the results of successful partnerships between schools and arts organizations. If your school or setting does not currently have such a partnership in place, consider contacting a local organization whose goals are focused on an area of performing arts that you are interested in. For example, The Lyric Opera of Chicago has opera programs for elementary students, and Carnegie Hall in New York has a music curriculum for second and third graders. In addition to developing a full-scale partnership, you may be able to implement portions of a lesson or activity with the support of the arts organization, or utilize its educational materials or performance venues for your class.

Connecting With Guest Artists

One of the greatest experiences for elementary students is when a guest speaker visits the class to share firsthand accounts of a particular trade, job, or endeavor. Similarly, the guest artists and teaching artists who visit and collaborate with classroom teachers (some freelance and others through arts organizations) provide students with a unique perspective on the arts, hands-on participation, and an opportunity to take ownership over their work. Examples of these include a dance specialist teaching free movement with a class of fifth graders in a high-risk, urban school; a theater teacher engaging English language learners in a fourth-grade class of students whose primary languages include Mandarin and Hindi; and a music teacher bringing a variety of stringed instruments (ranging from a banjo to a sitar) for a class of kindergarteners to explore.

Conversations with the students, teachers, and teaching artists in these examples mirrored one another. There was a consistent desire to extend and continue these experiences. Among students, there was a notable increase in motivation to attend school and participate in activities. Among classroom teachers, there was consistent enthusiasm for these unique collaborations.

While some artists may visit these classes as volunteers, it is important to recognize that such visits are an additional source of funding for their own artistic endeavors, and so many may require stipends for their visits. Allocating a small amount of funds each year for these

types of artistic connections may allow for only one or two visits, but these visits will surely make a lasting impression on your students.

Connecting at Live Performances

Most every performing artist will assert the value of experiencing a live performance of a practiced group of performers in a public venue. While the performing arts have a valued and meaningful place in the classroom, the opportunity to see a live show or sit in the audience of a grand performance hall is one that many students may never experience. Many educators have written about the audience experience, the learning that takes place when watching a live show (see Reason, 2010), and the importance of these perspectives for students' understanding and appreciation of the performing arts.

Scheduling and planning a field trip seems the ideal choice for implementing this type of opportunity, but many schools do not have funding for such trips, nor are all parents able to provide financial support or additional expenses for school activities. Importantly, the same arts organizations and performance venues that have educational outreach programs often provide discounted or free performances for schools. In fact, many venues allow audience members to watch dress rehearsals free of charge. At these performances, students may also have the chance to meet the performers, explore the stage and set, or observe the interactions backstage, giving an entirely new dimension to their understanding of the performing arts.

Maintaining Connections

The ideas presented in this chapter are meant as starting points for supporting your integrated performing arts programs. The examples of organizations, artists, and venues will clearly vary in each community, but the goal here is to try to build and maintain a partnership that will inform artistic opportunities for your students.

As you shape the role of the performing arts in your classroom, create two lists—one of immediate needs, and one of idealistic hopes. Share these with the individuals you speak with, the artists who visit your classroom, and the organizations who open their doors to your students. While these connections are not requisite for integrating the performing arts, collaborative opportunities will provide multiple resources for you and your students and continue to foster the shared experiences inherent to the performing arts.