THE ARTS, COMMUNITY, AND THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

Caitlin Noel Clarke
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THE ARTS, COMMUNITY, AND THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

A Project

by

Caitlin Noel Clarke

Approved by:

__________________________________, Committee Chair
Karen D. Benson, Ph.D.

Date: ____________________________
Student: Caitlin Noel Clarke

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______________________, Associate Chair
Rita M. Johnson, Ed.D.  Date

Department of Teacher Education
Abstract

of

THE ARTS, COMMUNITY, AND THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Caitlin Noel Clarke

This project is a Culminating Experience for a Masters of Arts in Education: Curriculum and Instruction with an Emphasis on Arts in Education. The project follows Pathway III: Developing a curriculum, program, or performance related to arts education or arts in education. The author is a general education teacher who has worked on composing a school song and completing a video yearbook to capture her elementary school’s historic first year. The methodology used throughout this project was narrative research. The researcher utilized reflective journals as narrative inquiry combined with interviews and written feedback from professionals, students, and families within the school community. Both the school song and video yearbook were a response to the school’s commitment to character education through building a strong community; and the goal of the work was to support the growth and development of a public school setting and community connection through the arts.

________________________________, Committee Chair
Karen D. Benson, Ph.D.

________________________________
Date
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

This project is a Culminating Experience for a Masters of Arts in Education: Curriculum and Instruction with an Emphasis on Arts in Education. The project follows Pathway III: Developing a curriculum, program, or performance related to arts education or arts in education.

The Challenge

In today’s public schools, educators and parents alike have struggled to teach abstract concepts of character, integrity, responsibility, accountability, contribution, discipline, trustworthiness, respect, compassion, acceptance, and citizenship to youth. As a result, there has been little impact and action within the home and school connection to create a space where effective community building, collaboration, cooperation, and contribution could take place. This project addressed the importance the arts play in building character/community and academic education in public schools, and how taking away the arts negatively impacts the public school community and academic performance. The researcher asked: How can one use the arts, specifically music in the form of a school song, as a way to represent and build a school community and culture? In addition, she presented all findings and the theme of community building by creating a video yearbook.
Importance

In ancient cultures and civilizations, the arts were utilized as a way to communicate and express ideas and thoughts, as well as carry on the traditions of a given culture. In fact, artifacts of art, music, movement, and drama are all that are left to tell of some early civilizations. Today, the arts, specifically music, remain a critical component of society. Between media and technological advancements, youth have seemingly limitless access to artists in the entertainment business. Further, reality shows on television focus on finding the next, best, undiscovered talent, yet the public school system is constantly putting arts programs on the chopping block.

This mixed message of societal support for artistic expression versus a lack of arts in the education system is confusing and has had devastating results. Some of the results have included, but are not limited to students missing out on opportunities to share, express, and exercise their creativity and artistry with the world. Including students in an artistic process allows them the opportunity to discover skills, talents, abilities, and strengths they did not previously know they had. In addition, the arts engage and empower them to participate and be motivated in the learning process. In turn, this type of enthusiasm can transfer to learning core curricula.

Context

During the first year of the project, the teacher worked at a new school site, an elementary school which housed approximately 300 students from Kindergarten through sixth grade. There were 14 full-time teachers and 12 additional staff, including the school
secretary, librarian, and administrator. The entire staff, principal, and the intermediate music teacher all supported the teacher’s work on the projects, which consisted of two artistic responses to the school community. The teacher composed the school song, including lyrics. The lyrics were a collaboration based on a survey taken of the staff and students at the school site. The second project the teacher created was a video yearbook of the school site’s historic first year. The song was a response to the school’s commitment to character education through building a strong community.

The teacher completed her projects – composing the song, putting together the video yearbook for the elementary school, and presenting them to the elementary school faculty – while working at a middle school within the same district. The middle school had approximately 800 students and 36 staff members. Working with a larger and more established site impacted the teacher’s awareness, perception, and growth both as an educator and as an individual as she completed her project.

Procedure

Throughout the process, the researcher was in communication and conversation with the principal, staff, and music teacher about what the school song project entailed. The educator also created a survey and compiled feedback from the students and staff about two questions. 1. What do you like about being at our school? 2. What does character mean to you? The teacher organized and scheduled time to compose the school song and put the lyrics to it, received feedback on the initial sharing of the song, and
compiled all images and video footage from the school year. In addition, she distributed a copy of the video yearbook to the staff.

Main Questions

In searching and researching information regarding the project, the educator focused on the following inquiries. First, she studied the impact of music and the creative process in the classroom context. Second, she researched how to create a place where multiple intelligences and teaching strategies were utilized to access community and core curricula within the classroom. Last, she took on the significance and importance of developing community, character, and life skills through classroom management within the school setting.

As shared earlier, abstract concepts of character, integrity, responsibility, accountability, contribution, discipline, trustworthiness, respect, compassion, acceptance, and citizenship are challenging to teach to children, but they are necessary. The teacher implemented community and character building instruction at the beginning of both school years she taught during the time she completed the project, first at the elementary school in July 2008 and second at the middle school in July 2009. She integrated strategies and communicated with students and staff across grade levels, as well as with families about the significance of building a foundation of such life skills for children. In addition, she worked on the school yearbook and talent show, was part of the Through Accommodations All Students can Achieve (TAASA) and Equity committees, and was the site coordinator for the Picturing America Project.
Prior to taking on this culminating project in the Master’s program, the teacher previously worked on artistic projects for two sites where she completed her student teaching, which included a musical PowerPoint for her third grade class and a class song written in collaboration with her first grade class. The two culminating projects completed in her Master’s work expanded and enriched all her prior experience in two mediums of artistic expression. The project was an opportunity to both expand her expertise and reflect on her work and accomplishments as she embarked on a new career in education.

Research

The teacher began her research by looking at theorists such as Howard Gardner and John Dewey whose work supported her stand on the importance of arts in education as a contribution to the overall development of students. In addition, the teacher included insights made by John Berger on the way individuals look at the world as developed through their past experiences. The teacher’s research also included reflection and documentation of her experience with these projects, as well as the school community’s responses to the questions and work being produced. The goal of the projects was to connect music with the students, staff, and families that made up the school community and set the foundational tone for a creative, successful, educational experience for everyone.
Creating Change

The teacher’s creativity was inspired by others’ creativity and expression. Therefore, the projects opened up space and opportunity for her to be creative within the context of the education system of which she is a member. This provided a unique forum in which the teacher was able to create and share her own talents with others in her professional environment. Also, this work provided an opportunity for her to build rapport, trust, enthusiasm, purpose, support, and community within the general education classroom. Throughout the process, the teacher learned the capacity to which young students can participate in the process of composing music, act as lyricists, and become video producers. Further, the teacher applied that rapport and connection with students to their gaining access to the core curriculum.

Leadership

The teacher provided an example and resource for action in building a community and culture within a new school site. By empowering the students to share their responses to what character means and what it is like being at the school, she received their contribution, and they understood that they could contribute to something beyond their personal interests. It was also a chance for the teacher to connect her staff, students, and school with the larger community on what the school stands for by sharing through music. This was significant because the greater community got a glimpse of what they could be part of in supporting the school in a variety of ways. The results of this inquiry
and study were a composed school song with lyrics presented to the principal and school and a video yearbook distributed to each staff member.

Definitions

Aesthetic Experience

A branch of philosophy that deals with the nature and expression of beauty, as in the fine arts; the study of the psychological responses to beauty and artistic experiences; a conception of what is artistically valid or beautiful; an artistically beautiful or pleasing appearance; as created by John Dewey.

Cause/in action

Fulfilling a pathway to complete a task

Character Education

Learning centered on training and development in the life skills of integrity, responsibility, accountability, contribution, discipline, trustworthiness, respect, compassion, acceptance, and citizenship

Community

An interacting population of various individuals in a common location, in this case, an elementary school in the public education system of California

Compose

To form by putting together; to form the substance of; to produce by composition; to create by mental or artistic labor; to formulate and write (a piece of music)
Collaboration

To work jointly with others or together

Connection

The act of connecting; the state of being connected; relation or association; a means of communication or transport; a social, professional, or commercial relationship; a set of persons associated together

Contribution

Giving one’s time, ideas, abilities, knowledge, and assistance in order to help others without expectation of compensation

Creativity

Expressing oneself through representation. Examples would be through music, art, movement, or drama.

Culture

The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; the characteristic features of everyday existence (as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time; the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterize an institution or organization; the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic

Impact

To have a direct effect on
Leadership

The office or position of a leader; the capacity to lead; the act or an instance of leading.

Life skills

Skills, strategies, and practices necessary to be successful in society. Examples are: integrity, responsibility, accountability, contribution, discipline, trustworthiness, respect, compassion, acceptance, and citizenship.

Lyrics

The words of a song, often used in plural.

Multiple Intelligences

A theory identified by Howard Gardner in 1983 that includes eight different forms of intelligences. They are linguistic, logical/mathematical, spatial, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, bodily/kinesthetic, and natural intelligences. He further declares that intelligence, as defined previously, does not sufficiently encompass the wide variety of abilities humans display.

Representation

An artistic likeness or image; a statement or account made to influence opinion or action; a dramatic production or performance.

Sharing

To partake of, use, experience, occupy, or enjoy with others; to have in common; to grant or give a share in; to tell (as thoughts, feelings, or experiences) to others.
Talent
A characteristic feature, aptitude, or disposition of a person; the natural endowments of a person; a special often athletic, creative, or artistic aptitude; general intelligence or mental power

Tradition
An inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (in this case as a social custom); the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction; cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions; characteristic manner, method, or style

Transfer
To convey from one person, place, or situation to another; to cause to pass from one to another

Limitations
The first limitation the teacher encountered was time. There was an urgency to complete the projects quickly because she did not have job security or any certainty about her job placement in the future. In the middle of the process, the educator was employed at a middle school. This created a limitation in frequency and amount of time she could devote to the completion of the projects while working within a new community and setting. Further, the teacher also needed to balance completing the statewide Credential Clearing Program, referred to as Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA).
The next challenge or limitation was organization and scope. It was difficult to collect data from the whole school community with regard to both the song and the video yearbook within the allotted time, especially after the teacher accepted a new teaching assignment at a middle school. She struggled to balance time between the two sites to get feedback on the song, so the final piece produced was a representation of the whole school population as a collaborative effort. In addition, both the site and the teacher’s first work site were newly established communities, so the experience of building community for both the site and the teacher were negligible.

The final limitation the teacher faced in completing the projects was in the area of resources. On a budget, the teacher needed to complete the projects from her own funds using programs she had in her home database to produce the song and video. She used her own still and video cameras to create the end products in the programs Microsoft PowerPoint, Vegas Video, and Acid Music Player.
Chapter 2

RELEVANT REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter is devoted to research on theories and practices behind the integration of the arts as a contribution to community and education in the public school system. The first part is a look at theorists and theories surrounding the highly debated role of the arts in education in the context of what makes an education complete. The second and third parts of this chapter focus on the role of theatre in the community and the role of theatre in the K-12 public education system.

Arts in Education, Theories and Practice

We are born with brains, but our minds are made, and the shape they take is influenced by the culture in which that development occurs. For children, the school constitutes a primary culture for the development of the mind. (Eisner, 1998, p. 78)

Many theories on meaningful education for children have been created, yet no single theory works for every person in every situation. The pendulum of focus has swung from supporting content and curriculum through the social sciences, the arts, and life skills, and back to the excessively standardized curriculum. The most significant conclusion one may find is that there is no single way of teaching curriculum that will reach all students. By seeking to engage and create meaningful learning through authentic and differentiated instruction, teachers can be successful in the educational environment. An important distinction to make is that in education, the goal is to build autonomous,
contributing members of society who develop something innovative, unique, and special. Why, then, should teachers approach educating all students in exactly the same way if they want them to become unique, fully expressed, powerful, and prepared individuals who will lead in the future? The purpose of this review is to present the role disposition plays in student and teacher success in the classroom. As well, teachers can provide each and every student empowerment through offering opportunities for them to experience a differentiated and well-rounded education enriched through the arts.

In his work, Elliot Eisner (1998) stated his desire for a well rounded, quality, and equitable education for all individuals. In understanding the distinction that many types of knowledge can be deemed intelligence, Eisner declared that authentic, informal, and creative outlets, such as the arts, can lead to academic success in the education system. By including the arts as a key role in education, more opportunity for success and meaningful experiential learning would be retained long after any standardized test was given. He was not the only individual who felt this way.

Theorist, psychologist, and educational innovator Howard Gardner (1983) created and put into practice a theory which outlined many ways an individual may be considered gifted or intellectually sound. More than a single type of measure can be used to gauge intelligence. He called it the Multiple Intelligences. They include Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, Musical, Bodily-Kinesthetic, Spatial-Visual, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, and Natural. Gardner declared that all people possess a bit of each intelligence, but some
are simply more dominant than others. In addition, the dominance of a given intelligence can change over time and in different situations.

Recognizing the unique qualities, abilities, and talents each child has contrasts with engaging all students in a formal, strict, intensely rigorous, standards-based curriculum. Because children have individual strengths and talents, teaching them a single uniform “drill and kill” curriculum has proven to be unsuccessful. The outcome has resulted in constantly fluctuating and changing standards, curricula, and challenges for educators and students alike. Eisner (1998) stated, “the curriculum we prescribe for schools and the time we allocate for subjects shows children what adults believe is important for them to learn” (p. 77). Students have to experience and acquire skills in various subject areas in order to be prepared for the world beyond the classroom. By limiting the time and range of material dedicated within the school day, we are teaching children what and how to value; and what is being presented as greatest value today are statistics, test scores, and how well an individual can bubble in a Scantron. Is this the legacy we want to leave our children and future generations with?

Additionally, Eisner (1998) shared that only through rethinking the process by which academic success is measured can research become more meaningful and more accurate of a person’s knowledge. Eisner proclaimed, “when one seeks not uniformity of outcome, but productive diversity, the need to create forms of evaluation that can handle uniqueness of outcomes becomes increasingly apparent” (p. 68). When we as a society are ready to foster critical thinking, unique and various contributions, and diversity of
thought and approach, instead of following the solitary rigid formula we currently apply to evaluate competency, then we will be able to create and produce greater innovation and advancements in all professional settings and societal arenas.

Donald Arnstine (1967) understood that disposition is a key to success for students, as well as educators. By disposition, Arnstine meant a continuous tendency, a habit or a learned behavior, such as curiosity, inquiry, and motivation. The above and other dispositions should be developed and fostered in the education system. Awareness of dispositions is critical for teachers if they are to be engaging and authentic so students trust and believe in the curriculum being presented. Teaching must be presented with integrity, passion, and enthusiasm so students understand the worth and value of what is being taught. Teachers need to create conditions for curiosity, questioning, critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity to emerge. Thus, teachers must have a tendency to see content in its role as an aesthetic cue, as a prod to curiosity, or as a cue to awareness of a problem, and see it as supplying the material for the pursuit of initiating situations. (Arnstine, 1967, p. 370)

So if it is the job of the educator to provide such a setting in the classroom that engages and inspires all students to gain comprehension and mastery of material taught across subject matter, how does an educator go about doing this successfully?

If one aim of education is to provide access and opportunity to explore and experience, then that would be in line with theorists John Dewey (1934) and Donald Arnstine (1967) who believed that experience distinguishes a successful education. While
the pendulum continues to swing back and forth, Dewey and Arnstine argued that no matter the goals of education at a given time, true knowledge occurs when one is fully experiencing the present. Without the combination of both interest and experience, individuals are neither engaged nor focused on what is happening. Therefore, to create and support students, educators must create and support their development of self-knowledge through a range of meaningful experiences.

Dewey made the distinction that having an aesthetic experience is the unity between the experience itself and the aesthetic quality or element of that experience. Although one has a multitude of experiences throughout a lifetime, Dewey (1934) professed that the only time an experience can fully reach its capacity is when the relationship between undergoing and doing is present. Thus, giving and receiving takes place within an experience and the individual must be wholly present to both parts to fully experience the moment or event. Practical, logical, and intellectual components are valid in any experience, but more occurs to fully experience a moment. The emotional element must also be part of the experience for it to be a complete experience. Arnstine (1967) transferred Dewey’s concept into the effect both experience and experiencing have on the accessing and learning of curricula.

A lstine (1967) made the distinction between what curricula usually refers to as “particular knowledge and skills taught in school” and what is defined as “the sum of the educational experiences that children have in school” (p. 339). The distinction, though often overlooked, goes beyond curriculum and includes traits such as the disposition,
interest, context, and values. Furthermore, he stated that the teacher, the one experiencing the learning with the students, should be the one in charge of choosing curriculum. This brings to light the significance of student interest in a given subject area and how context is critical to engaging an individual in purposeful and meaningful learning. Both Arnstine (1967) and Dewey (1934) believed that the benefits of educating students in the arts and life skills would develop individuals and prepare them for careers and being contributing members to society.

Theorist John Berger (1972), author of *Ways of Seeing*, also saw the world through a basic understanding and distinction about humans and experience. Berger discussed the idea that how one see things is directly correlated to what they know and believe. Berger (1972) said people see before they talk, and the events and actions that take place from birth affect perspective on what is seen. In a way, stories are created based on what the past has revealed, which allows the past to influence and shape the present and, potentially, the future. First, humans see, then speak, and, finally, become aware of what they see. Through experience, one’s awareness and stories begin to conjure a perspective and a version of what one is looking at. If so, then what might constitute a full or complete education?

One way of providing a well rounded, holistic education is to include the arts. As Education Through Music (ETM) educator and professor Dr. Randal McChesney put it, the way the arts impact his students is in getting them to “think to behave,” instead of focusing on getting them to “behave so they can think” (Gardner as cited in McChesney,
2008). He and his fellow ETM educators create an environment in the classroom that invites participation, engagement, and freedom of expression without worry or concern of being right or wrong. Music provides skills and rewards that transfer across the curriculum. Music provides skills and rewards that transfer across the curriculum. Teachers often struggle to create and enact a successful management and behavioral plan in the classroom. Yet, having the tools to create an effective classroom environment, through techniques found in arts education like ETM, affords educators an opportunity to spend more time teaching curriculum instead of simply trying to manage the class.

That is not to say the arts must strictly be taught in conjunction with curriculum. The arts need to be taught for the sake of the arts, and not just to satisfy other areas of core curriculum. Carl Orff, composer and creator of the Orff-Schulwerk Music for Children Organization, responded to this idea by simply saying “in the beginning was the drum” (Orff, 1978, p. 17). He understood the distinction that prior to all of the elaborate and complex curricula created over time, music, dance, art, and theatre existed. The arts, in and of themselves, are innate to being human, participating in the arts for the value, aesthetically and otherwise, is justification enough to do so. Dewey, Arnstine, and Eisner would agree with that idea.

Many theories on a meaningful education for children have been written, yet a consensus remains elusive. Elliot Eisner, John Dewey, Donald Arnstine, and John Berger are just a few of the many who spent their lives exploring and developing ideas to make education more successful, equal, and equitable for all. The catalyst for each of their
theories is the significance of the experience. Further, individuals such as Howard Gardner, Randal McChesney, and Carl Orff have devoted their lives to developing success and autonomy for all people so that one day everyone can understand, value, and appreciate that they can contribute in their own unique ways to the global society. Children knowing that they have something to offer this world, and actually having the tools and access to make that offering a reality, is an empowering context that should be the basis and focus of education in the K-12 public school system.

Theatre and the Community

Where do people look to capture the essence of community and society? Where do historians, researchers, and specialists go to gather evidence of how local, national, and global communities and civilizations have evolved over time? And further, how do such specialists evaluate what various peoples value in a given community or society? They look to the arts. In visual art, music, dance, and theatre, humans have recorded their history and culture for thousands of years. The cave drawings of early civilizations describe the lifestyle and capture the history, norms, and traditions of ancient peoples. For generations, Native Americans, Aboriginals, and African tribes have used music, movement, and dance to record and pass on their history to the younger members of their societies. The contribution of the Greek and Roman theatres not only brought entertainment, but they also stand as a testament and contribution of a time and place long since passed. Utilizing the arts as a representation of community, society, and culture is embedded in what it means to be human.
Today, the scope for capturing data on community, society, and culture has broadened due to the advancement of technology. Instead of deciphering drawings on a cave wall, searching for the last survivor of a lost culture, or sifting through ancient templates that may offer a glimpse of history, society has turned to such innovations as television, internet, instant messaging, blogging, and web posting. All of these offer immediate access to the world. Instead of a chosen few having access to material and stories of communities and society, the masses are now connected, can actively participate, and can influence how a given people are perceived. What is being done with such access and far-reaching resources?

When it comes to community, the arts have provided opportunities for individuals to express themselves, their views, ideas, and contributions as active participants in society. Whether it be captured on film, performed on the stage, recorded in a studio, or brushed onto a canvas, the arts allow individuals to have a voice in how they see the world. Furthermore, the arts have a way of sparking interest and intrigue, which can lead to discussion and critical thinking about issues that face a community.

Theatre has been the source of vast community and society building and has brought about great change as well. Brazilian political activist and leader, Augusto Boal (1979) utilized the multi-faceted capabilities of theatre and expanded its capacity to effect change by creating a technique he coined Theatre of the Oppressed. Developed as an active response to Paolo Freire’s (1970) theories in the work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, it combined traditional theatre practices and community activism to enact change in both
political and social regimes (Boal, 2008). His book consists of five major forms of theatre referred to as Newspaper, Forum, Image, Legislative, and Invisible Theatre. The forms have been applied to establish dialogues and effect change on numerous issues worldwide since being published in 1973. He argued that theatre is a human language that can be applied to speak to all topics and concerns. Through a balance of discipline and creativity, all people can live in dignity and find solutions to challenges they face (Boal, 2008). Boal emphasized that theatre is not merely a means of entertainment, but rather language accessible to all. He epitomized this throughout his political reign as Vereador (equivalent to a city council representative) in Rio De Janeiro from 1992-1996 (Boal, 2008). Boal broke down the barrier between the performer and the audience, replacing the monologue with a two-way dialogue responsible for the enactment of at least 13 new laws within his brief four years in office.

He created and carried out the transformation by providing the “common man” and those who were of lower class access to contribute to change and development within the community. Instead of speaking for them, he gave those who were directly affected by the decisions made by the government the opportunity to share concerns, challenges, and problems. As well, he allowed them to be part of the decision making process. The result is that the people of the community invested in and had a reason to support the leadership of their city; it supported them. In the years following his political reign, Boal’s work has extended throughout the world and is currently being exercised in various venues to bring about change on a global scale.
While theatre can be a platform to ratify change in a political climate, it can also be an outlet to provide live art and more. Important to note is that theatre is a shared experience that supports the norms and traditions of life in a given community. Additionally, theatre can be the catalyst for creating a connection and commonality among diverse people by representing society through performance. On a wider scale, the performance of theatre provides a multitude of opportunities for people to experience global ideas and concepts at a local level thereby taking the distant and bringing it close (Cohen-Cruz, 2004).

The theatre is a venue in which people of any age and walk of life can share in the experience. Unfortunately, due to limited financial backing and the convenience of viewing live performances from home, going out into the community to attend the theatre, galleries, museums, and other artistic venues has become less appealing to the masses. A glimmer of hope lies in the largest, noncommercial performing arts programs within given communities: the schools and local amateur community theatres (Schechner, 2004). Within the school framework, performance not only impacts the students themselves, but the teachers and administration, parents and families, and the surrounding communities. A school’s community both benefits and takes pleasure in the entertainment and opportunity to participate in the celebration of student achievement and success (Urice, 2004).

In a study published in the Journal of Early Adolescence in May 2006, reports were made that showed the correlation between a structured arts program within low-
income communities in Canada and the impact it had on the individual’s psychosocial functioning and development (Wright, Ellenbogen, Offord, Duku, & Rowe, 2006). The findings were that those students who participated in the programs showed a considerable decline in the level of emotional problems and that, in this way, youth who participated in community structured arts programs experienced benefits that translated into their personal and social development (Wright et al., 2006). While this important demographic occurs in many communities, there are other groups of students who have benefited from integration of theatre and the arts within their communities.

In another study that focused on the population of adolescents with acquired brain injuries, the object was to find a way to support this population of individuals who had withdrawn from interacting with their peers in social and communal environments (Goyal & Keightley, 2008). After 12 years of searching throughout Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, 10 studies were brought back to report on drama-based treatments and programs implemented to improve components of social interaction or connection within the community for a wide range of populations (Goyal & Keightley, 2008). Children who struggled physically, emotionally, cognitively, or socially were observed. The impact of theatre on their ability to function in respect to these capacities was the key to the body of work. The outcome of the study indicated that drama therapy was effective in bringing about greater psychological health, emotional intelligence, cognitive function, and social integration to adolescents with acquired brain injuries. These far-reaching and advanced resources in local, national, and global communities
must be applied in education. How can these creative means be adapted to fulfill the shortcomings within the current public education system?

Theatre and the Public Education System, K-12

Theatre has been utilized as an educational tool in the public school system as far back as the Great Depression (Bell-Ellison, Forthofer, McDermott, Zapata, Nearns, Curran et al., 2009). The art form possesses a vast scope and range by which it can be used to support the diversity and differentiation necessary for all students to receive an equitable educational experience. However, the topic of the arts in education has become increasingly heated and debated in recent years as to its purpose and relevance within the educational context.

Today, most public schools focus on the “drill and kill” of core curriculum and on preparation and performance of students on high-stakes testing rather than on the arts and developing the individual. Philosopher of education Paolo Freire (1985) discussed the role of education in society. He believed that teaching relies on “being aware of the concrete conditions in the students’ world” (p. 1) and fostering knowledge that will help students solve problems they encounter in the world. By this he meant that what knowledge is worth knowing is that which is relevant and matters to the individual, based on his/her life experience. Being able to bubble in answers on a multiple-choice test is not sufficient to achieve this goal.

While there is value and necessity in the assessment of student knowledge, the value placed on it, as opposed to building the overall well-being of the individual, seems
to be skewed. If the goal of education is to promote autonomous contributing members of society, as Dewey suggested, students will need to learn more than how to read, write, and do arithmetic. A way for life skills and social skills to be developed is through participation in the arts. The only problem is that, largely due to lack of funding, arts programs across the United States are being cut. As the pendulum swings away from the arts, one must ask if cutting the arts is best for children and the future.

The role disposition plays in both student and teacher success in the classroom is not based on how neatly one can bubble in a Scantron. When both the teacher and the student are forced to focus only on standards, pacing, memorization, and regurgitation of academic standards, the social and developmental component of their being is neglected. This disregard of the development of self within the educational context sends a message to educators, children, and communities alike that the individual is not as important as the statistic.

While policymakers state that their goal is to support the building of well rounded and holistic education, their actions prove otherwise. In May 2008, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, proposed cutting over $6 billion to the public education system (Conway & Martinez, 2008). In addition to a “10 percent across-the-board cut” (p. 1) in funding to state and social programs such as the arts, state and federal funding is being cut in the area of counseling and psychological services offered to students within the public education system. These cuts included lay-offs of over 20,000 teachers and school employees in the primary and secondary public education system alone, with the
potential of an additional 87,000 more K-12 teachers and staff positions being removed upon the passing of the budget (Conway & Martinez, 2008).

According to the article by Dan Conway and Kevin Martinez (2008), “California is just one of twenty-two states who have reached a combined deficit of over thirty-nine billion dollars, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities” (p. 1). Within the current challenges and struggles faced by the “working class...particularly those who are directly affected by the budget cuts,” it is critical that all who make up this vast umbrella of the state community work together to support the “hundreds of thousands of Californians who depend on state-provided services to simply maintain a decent standard of living” (p. 1). Such groups include, but are not limited to, administrators, custodians, health care professionals, and the more than 7,000 state employees who will soon lose their jobs (Conway & Martinez, 2008).

In addition to a mandated curriculum and schedule, students are being provided with fewer resources, tools, and support to deal with the challenges they face. The result is that classroom teachers and site administration bear the burden of filling this void, as well as having to maintain the pacing, standards, and high-stakes testing performance as set forth by state and federal legislation. These additional roles that general education teachers and administrators play are neither in their job descriptions, nor is it covered in their rigorous training and degree programs. Further, in cutting the positions filled by support staff such as counselors, psychologists, and specialists, they are being sent a message that their schooling and education, which earned them classification of highly
qualified, is not exclusively valued if other professionals can simply fill in. One way educators can presently utilize their expertise to support student growth and development is by creating opportunities for the arts in the lives of children. Creating opportunities for the arts in the lives of children does provide an opportunity for them to succeed and thrive under the current conditions of the education system because life skills of critical thinking, role playing, and problem solving are embedded in the curriculum. The arts offer numerous avenues for students to develop as individuals. Theatre and drama are perhaps the most dynamic methods to do so, as it can incorporate various elements of both visual and performing arts to support the development of critical life skills applicable to academics as well as the real world for which educators are preparing them.

Today’s society has developed a strong propensity for the language of “yes” and “no,” and “right” and “wrong.” Norms and traditions have evolved into a “cookie cutter” uniformity, which stifles creativity, individuality, and artistic expression. While the challenge is no longer access to making learning holistic and well rounded, there still remains a lack of action and voice for the individuals to fully express themselves. A chosen few choose, decide, and govern what is acceptable, appropriate, and allowed in the education system. The voice of the people needs to be heard. Children need to learn to be confident in their own voice and in their contribution to society.

If one simply looks at the research, all records will point in the direction of the arts. In particular the dramatic arts, as “theatre is a way for students to learn with virtually no wrongs” (Robinson, 2009). Paolo Freire (1985) declared that education should be a
two-way dialogue where there is give and take between the educator and the students, providing opportunity for educators to be the learners as well. Freire believed that the fundamental goal of education is to develop ideals of social equality. Freire (1985) focused on the purpose of education as being an equalizer of access to both knowledge and power. Like Freire, Augusto Boal saw the purpose of theatre as a means to equalize society through exposing and bringing awareness of the inequities that exist within it. These concepts are not dissimilar to the content standards and goals of the public education system. The difference lies in the approach and carrying out of the ideals.

Boal said it best when he stated, “while some people make theatre, we are all theater” (Brecht Forum, n.d.). Both theorists Donald Arnstine and John Dewey believed that the benefits of educating students in the arts and life skills would prepare individuals for careers and for becoming contributing members to society. Aside from it being an outlet, theatre is an innate ability and trait all people possess. It is a great forum to build both academic and social success within the educational setting.

The benefits of dramatic arts education are numerous and expansive in their range and scope. These benefits may include, but are not limited to, increased levels of self-esteem, interpersonal skills, ability to work cooperatively, ability and enthusiasm to express themselves freely, ownership and responsibility in their physical presentation and work that they produce, and fluency in oral communication. An increased skill set transfers to higher academic performance levels in student writing, presentation of material taught, and critical thinking within core curricular content, not to mention a
heightened level of engagement and personal motivation to succeed in all areas of life. Also vital to include is the level of confidence theatre develops in individuals to withstand and rise above adversity in their social interactions throughout their lives. Through theatre and dramatic arts, individuals are able to rekindle and reflect on their impact and role to both self and society (Lakes, 2005). Further, individuals are able to explore their own personal histories and life experiences. The freedom provided to create based on both personal and communal experiences allows theatre to become a “medium through which storytellers can step into the perspectives of others and gain entry points to different worldviews” (Brian, 2005, p. 2).

Theatre has the capacity to change school climate. Middle school is arguably one of the most challenging times of an individual’s life. Many changes occur both internally and externally which can be extremely difficult to deal with. A middle school in Washington DC, Georgetown Day School, founded a student theatre group called the Safe Place Theater to bring topics of controversy, assumption, stereotyping, and issues related to gender and sexual orientation to the student body in a safe way (Shollenberger, 2007). The students address bullying, homophobia, sexism, and racism in a way to breakdown the barriers and to establish a working community in the school environment. Role-playing allows students to gain perspective and to problem solve within the protective realm of imagination and make believe. This is an effective tool for conflict management and student concerns about how to handle difficult social situations. By allowing children to act out possible scenarios and outcomes, they are able to see the
impact and response their actions and words have on others. They become empowered to take responsibility and ownership of the journey to their ultimate choice as well as the victory over their past frustrations and defeats in the given situation at hand. This type of theatre exercise can be utilized in any classroom as a game or tool to build community and effective management at any age.

In Petaluma, California, an elementary school set a goal to assure that every teacher at the site would make the “fundamental shift” from teacher-centric to learner-centric thinking (Williamson & Zimmerman, 2009). Old Adobe Elementary School staff, headed by Principal Jeff Williamson, came up with guiding questions to help them shift their focus from “things and activities to student learning and teacher beliefs that guide their actions” (p. 39). The questions that guided their inquiry focused on 1) How to offer a well-rounded curriculum, which would incorporate the visual and performing arts in every classroom, and 2) How they would substantiate the work to prove student benefits across curriculum. Throughout the inquiry, teachers collaborated, engaged in deep discussions on the topic, and functioned as a learning community that enriched the cohesiveness of the entire school.

A school-based intervention was created around the topic of eating disorders for a population of fourth to sixth grade girls in 2008. This theatre program aimed to address young girls’ perceptions on the topic of weight-related issues. The program was called Very Important Kids, and the students performed a play about the issues associated with weight. In her article, Haines, Neumark-Sztainer, and Morris (2008) stated that the
participants had the opportunity to be role models and that being part of a team made the experience even more memorable for them. Her findings included an “increased resilience to comments from others, positive changes in communication with peers, and improved body satisfaction emerged as the prominent changes students identified as occurring as a result of their participation in the program” (p. 248). In this way, the findings suggest that theatre can be an effective tool for positively impacting students’ perspective on self-esteem issues dealing with weight-related disorders.

In the article, “My True Voice Project,” by Natalie Baker Shirer (2005), she discussed a program created through the implementation of principles in theatre education as a means to teach students skills in effective oral communication. It addressed the shared goals between arts education policy and general education policy. She expressed that “communities that are rich in artistic opportunity and involvement are more likely to undergo revitalization, tend to be culturally and economically diverse, and often have a high level of community involvement in forums other than the arts” (Shirer, 2005, p. 25). Moreover, cultural opportunities can “influence a community’s economic and demographic growth, because the high-level workers known as ‘knowledge workers’ prefer to live in artistically rich areas” (p. 25).

At the high school level, theatre productions are also able to bring about broad benefits to all who participate. In addition to supporting students, such productions can bring a sense of camaraderie and community within the school setting similar to that of athletic and sporting events, as noted by John Urice of the Arts Education Policy Review
Theatre, like sports, is an outlet by which students who struggle in academic areas feel and experience success. In fact, theatre could be the very thing that keeps them in school.

A multitude of reasons exist for which theatre and the dramatic arts are critical to the success of youth in the public education system. These include, but are not limited to, a tool for facilitating and managing appropriate behavior, and a source of enrichment to enhance the educational experience. Theatre at any level is a representation of a society and the culture, traditions, and norms of the people within it. Whether drama is performed at school, in a community center, or in a professional theatre, it has both a purpose and a place vital to the thriving of children. While arts programs, support services, and resources are being taken away and replaced by high-stakes testing and a rigorous standards-based curriculum, educators and the collective community are left to figure out how to fill the void such programs leave in children’s education and lives.

Although the public education system is struggling to succeed and provide for each and every student within its structure, perhaps collaboration among policy makers and educators would provide an opportunity for progress and resolution of the major issues that currently plague public education. If all keep in mind that the overarching goal is to build strong and thriving future generations who are autonomous and contributing members of society, they must take the words and put them in action, perhaps in the form of a performance or theatrical production.
This literature review investigated the theories and practices behind the contribution of the arts as an integral part of education. This review also specifically addressed the connection between theatre and community, and the role theatre plays in the public education system. The goal of this chapter was to spark interest and bring attention to the need for the arts, and the impact the arts have on both the community and the school. By integrating the arts in both the community and the school, society has the opportunity to support the development of each child achieving the goal of becoming an autonomous and contributing member of society.
Chapter 3

THE PROJECT

This project is a Culminating Experience for a Masters of Arts in Education: Curriculum and Instruction with an Emphasis on Arts in Education. The project follows Pathway III: Developing a curriculum, program, or performance related to arts education or arts in education. The author and educator worked on composing a school song and completing a video yearbook to capture her elementary school’s historic first year. The methodology used throughout this project was narrative research. The author utilized reflective journals, combined with interviews and written feedback from professionals, students, and families of the school community. Therefore, Chapters 3 and 4 of this project are written in first person.

Narrative Inquiry

According to Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin (1990), the study of narrative is the “study of the ways humans experience the world” (p. 2). That narrative crosses all cultures and is embedded in us as humans (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Connelly and Clandinin (1990), also stated, “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2). More specifically, education and educational research is the “construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories” (p. 2), and, further, “learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters” in both their own and others’ stories (p. 2). The very act of our lives and living is innately a narrative, “for we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe,
doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative” (Hardy, 1977, p. 13). It is through narrative inquiry that individuals have the opportunity and responsibility to “articulate a relationship between one’s personal interests and sense of significance and larger social concerns expressed in the work and lives of others” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 122).

I used narrative inquiry within the context of my project about supporting the building of community in a new environment through the creation of a school song and video yearbook. As I embarked on this inquiry, I applied the research of theorists Howard Gardner (1983) and John Dewey (1934), whose work supported my position on the importance of arts in education as a contribution to the overall development of students in academics, as well as their social-emotional development and well-being. In addition, I further probed the insights of John Berger (1972) on the way individuals look at the world, as developed through their past experiences. As a result, my research combines examining others’ theories of effective education with my reflection on my own experience as I completed my work with my school community as well as the responses to the questions and work that I produced. The goal of the school song and video yearbook projects was to connect the students, staff, and families in the school community through music as a means to set the foundational tone for a creative, successful, educational experience for everyone.
Personal History

For as long as I can remember, music and dance have been integral parts of my life. Whether it was singing along with my mom as she played the piano or me at three singing and dancing for my sister, it was always present in my life. I come from a family rich in musicians and aficionados of all the arts. I grew up with an accordion playing grandfather, an uncle who quite literally could have been the fifth member of the Beatles, and a long line of vocal musicians. Furthermore, both of my sisters and I have danced nearly from the time we could walk. My parents have always supported us, and I have even had the pleasure and opportunity to provide them with a standing ovation after they have performed. My family shares a unique bond and love for the arts, and we are each other’s number one fans.

Growing up in a home where music was so much a part of us, it was not a surprise to my parents that their three daughters all took to the arts. At three, I took my first dance lesson, and I never looked back. I continued to dance through my elementary school years and beyond, studying every discipline from jazz, tap, ballet, and Pointe, to partnering, ballroom, and contemporary/modern. Also, at that time my mom brought my sisters, our friends, and me to sing in retirement homes for the elderly. I observed the pleasure and peace of mind it offered these individuals. Their joy and enthusiasm was contagious. Looking back, I am thankful and humbled to have had the chance to offer something so positive and uplifting to individuals who were going through an unclear and lonely time. I am not so sure any of us children understood the impact that our singing
had on those we sang for at the time, but I am clear it made a difference, as only music and the arts can.

When I attended middle school, I learned about the prestigious show choir and how it could provide me with the opportunity to sing and dance at the same time. As I progressed, I was introduced to the astounding world of musical theatre. Musical theatre was where I found my real passion within the arts: a place where music, dance, visual art, and theater come together as one to illustrate the numerous and diverse facets of the human condition. The arts contributed to the development of such life skills as discipline, confidence, balance, coordination, the value of practice and study, and the ability to collaborate and work with others. These transferred to my academics and enhanced my educational experience and success. The arts are the very thing that inspire and motivate me in my teaching and personal self expression today.

Perhaps the reason I chose to become a teacher in the first place was because of all of the influential and incredible teachers I had during my educational career as a student. It all began in pre-school, where I was able to act out stories like “The Three Little Kittens,” play house, play dress up, draw, dance and sing along to music, and build things from my own imagination. It was an extraordinary fantasy world of exploration where the only limits were those beyond what my mind’s eye could see. As I moved into primary school, I still remember our evening performances where we got to sing about America and the 50 states. Every student shared our dreams for what we would like to become when we grew up. To this day I remember every word of the song “Shine like a
Star,” and I still have the fluorescent yellow star with my name written in gold that I wore around my neck that night many years ago. I remember learning to speak Spanish and getting to learn Spanish customs with Mr. M. in third grade, including eating cooked crickets. Then, in fourth grade, my teacher clog danced for us when we accomplished a class goal at the annual school wide walk-a-thon. I will never forget the crazy history teachers I had in eighth grade that would dress up in period attire and reenact key American battles and stories of our country’s history, or the eccentric science teacher, who reminded me of the British comedic actor Mr. Bean. Then there was Madam W., who had her students call her Madam, even though she taught English. She used to teach French and just preferred the way it sounded. She would break into lines from Shakespeare whenever students were not participating in class discussions. Then there was Mr. A. who was the very essence of Grumpy from “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves,” although his disposition did not confuse the fact that he had the utmost expectations of his 10th grade students. Mr. H., who taught Advanced Placement (AP) U.S. History, handed out a compact disk at the end of the year containing songs that connected to classroom material, with cover art by one of our classmates. This does not even include the arts teachers I had throughout my middle and high school years.

I went to performing arts magnet middle and high schools where I had numerous opportunities to perform across the United States, and even in Scotland. I consider myself to be extremely lucky to have been able to participate in such experiences, which supported my development as a student, a musician and artist, and as an individual. The
educators who taught me how to sing and further develop my dancing and acting skills were teachers, but they did so much more than what their job description required of them. Because of these educators, I was inspired to accomplish great things in my life. The difference their dedication, sacrifices, and time made to me and others in their programs is priceless. Their passion for their work and their belief in youth to accomplish monumental achievements pushed me to look beyond what was right in front of me, to see past what is and to look at what could be. These educators were so generous with their passion and support that it seemed infectious. Not only did we students get to be part of the experience, but the participation of parents to chaperone, fundraise, and partake in the festivities and development of the magnet programs augmented the experience for everyone. The result of my experience was the culmination of educators, administrators, students, and families working together as a community for the common goal of providing children with extraordinary educational opportunities. Everyone cared and worked together to accomplish amazing feats, and that is what I want to see in today’s public education.

I have experienced first-hand the power of community and what it can do for the educational experience of a child, as I am the result of such an experience. Therefore, it is my goal to support and play an active role in the development of such programs in the public education system today. I completed my undergraduate work, earned my credential, and completed a Master’s in Arts in Education because I believe in the power of the arts as the catalyst for building community within the public education system.
I chose to participate in this Master’s Program for many reasons. The first was because of how much I believe in the arts as a contribution to the well-being and development of individuals, regardless of their race, economic status, gender, or creed. The arts are a forum through which all people can unite and be a part of something as a community. It is through the arts that communities come together and individuals from diverse walks of life can identify with one another. As I mentioned above, it made a difference for me, and I have seen the difference it has and can make in others’ lives.

Equally important to why I chose to participate in this Master’s Program were the dedicated and extraordinary professors who co-presented the core curriculum and other material. I had the privilege of working with one of the professors in my credential program and had met a second of the three professors during education events held at the university. Under their tutelage, hundreds of individuals, some teachers in specialized arts areas, some general education teachers, and some still working on their credentials, were inspired to collaborate, create, and share their enthusiasm and talents in the arts. The coursework was organized to maximize the growth and development of the artist, and the support and mentoring profoundly impacted the growth and development of the individual. While I could not have known the impact this program would have on me until I had experienced it, I had heard from several graduates of the program such positive and wonderful recommendations and feedback that I just could not pass up the opportunity.
The Process and the Projects

In California’s current economic and educational state, the public school system is suffering and struggling at best. Additionally, with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, many unforeseen challenges have arisen as a result of policymakers looking for a quick fix to the monumental challenge of how to most effectively provide a quality and equitable education for all children. To add insult to injury, funds are being cut, new and passionate teachers are being laid off, and emphasis continues to focus on students’ performance on standardized tests instead of the development of autonomous and contributing members of society. In a time when people lack trust, when they fear the well-being and sustainability of their families, of their jobs, and of their homes, it would be important to see the schools and school community come together to support one another. This is why I chose to write the school song and complete a video yearbook. I saw my school site, in its first year, as an example of what could happen when a community and a school pull together to support the success of its youth. I could not help but be moved by the level of cooperation, collaboration, and investment these families, educators, and administrators had in the growing community’s children. I was so honored and thankful to be witness to such an experience, one that reminded me of my own elementary school experience. I wanted to document this as an example of the invaluable treasure this site has, the gift it is offering its children, the staff working there, and the surrounding community.
Journey

My journey began in late July 2008 when I had my first staff meeting in my first teaching position. It was very exciting and new for me, but I was ready and raring to go. We spent the day much like the first day of school would be. We introduced ourselves, went over school rules and norms, discussed responsibilities and created committees, and then we got to create our school mission. Instantly, the staff was collaborating and working on ways to be connected with one another and build the community atmosphere quickly. I was in awe and this was only the beginning.

On July 22nd, I wrote in my journal:

I want my classroom to be a safe place. I want it to consist of a community built upon (mutual) respect, collaboration, and hard work. I want my class to be positive and inclusive so that all students want to participate and achieve success, both academically and socially. I want my classroom to be full of laughter, music, art, theater, and fun. I want my classroom to be a place where we can learn and grow together, while recognizing the strengths and unique talents of each individual member of our class. I want our class to accomplish this through open and honest communication by choosing to act (responsibly) with integrity.

This was in response to my principal sharing his vision for the new school, and the collaboration of the school mission statement, which is: P. R. Elementary School, “partnered with families, is a diverse and professional learning community in which all students are motivated to build academic achievement, good citizenship, and a strong
work ethic. Our expectation is to create life long learners who will become contributing, respectful members of society within a challenging and nurturing environment.”

The foundational quote my principal wanted us to incorporate and draw upon throughout our work was “Our character was what we do when we think no one is looking” by H. Jackson Brown, Jr. What I appreciated was that the quote so closely aligned with my personal pedagogy and approach to teaching. I felt excited to begin the year. The first day of school was July 28th, and it was exhilarating. It felt like the opening night of a show. In a way this was my debut. I had worked tirelessly to prepare the classroom and live up to the goals I had set for the classroom. At 8:15 a.m., my career as an educator began.

As the year got underway, I joined several committees in order to support and invest in the development of my school site and staff. I volunteered to work on yearbook, was a member of the Talent, Equity, and TAASA (Through Accommodations All Students Achieve) Committees, coordinated the “Character Counts” curriculum and collaborated with other teachers for the purpose of consistent delivery throughout the school, participated as a coach for the district wide Word Pyramid Tournament, and supervised after-school homework club to provide assistance for struggling students. I did all of this while simultaneously working to complete the clear credential program for new teachers, referred to as the Beginning Teachers Support and Assessment (BTSA), and attending California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) to begin work on my Master’s degree. While it was an intense experience, it also proved to be rewarding. Through my
participation on these committees, my reflections in my BTSA program for effective
teaching, and my research and inquiry in my Master’s program, I was inspired to
complete my projects.

Initially, I began my projects in December 2008. I created a timeline, collaborated
with the principal, music teacher, and school staff to get the work going. From January
through March of 2009, I collaborated with two colleagues to complete the school
yearbook and began organizing still pictures to incorporate into the video yearbook
project. In the spring of 2009, I captured much of my video footage, interviews, and
surveys which would provide me with the majority of my material for the video
yearbook, and I distributed the student surveys to help guide the creation of the school
song lyrics. As I worked on this project, I reflected on my own experience in the
California public education system and what really made a difference for me. I recalled
the impact of passionate and dedicated teachers and administration, combined with
generous parents and families who invested time and energy into the development and
collaboration of a meaningful and successful public education experience. I looked to
capture that sort of feeling in the projects I completed, and the feedback was positive.

I distributed the video yearbook to each of the school staff of the elementary
school, as well as shared with the principal and staff the school song. I shared the song in
two forms, first as a rap, and the second with accompaniment. I gave the principal and
staff full reign to do with the song whatever was appropriate. Part of the artistic process
is to release work into the world and see what happens. Sharing the video yearbook and
school song with the staff that inspired the work had a positive impact and truly made all of the work worth it. It also stood as a representation that these educators work did not go unnoticed. I shared that being given the opportunity to complete the project was a gift. During a very difficult and tumultuous time in education, when jobs and budgets were hard to come by, it felt great to be a source of positivity.

Challenges/Struggles

Confidence is a funny thing. As I have said, I experienced a great deal of the arts and trained in vocal music, dance, and theatre well into my college years. Even though I took some piano lessons over the years and completed an AP Music Theory course in high school, I really did not focus on the development of myself as a pianist and songwriter. In fact, because I had written music a couple of times before, I thought this project would be easy. I was wrong.

Initially there was no issue, but as I started to compose the music, panic and concern began to set in. When I spoke with the school site music teacher, she was supportive and enthusiastic at the idea of the school song. When I told her my plan to write the lyrics and the accompaniment, she shared that it seemed like “a lot of work” and that it was unnecessary. She said what she had done at other school sites was to take a simple melody the students were already familiar with, such as “Mary Had a Little Lamb” or “Bingo,” and to create new and simple lyrics that applied to the school site. While I appreciated the input, I felt as though she might have thought I could not make it happen. This only made me want to prove to myself and to others that I could do this.
What I realized, looking back now, is that everyone involved really did believe in me and that I was capable of creating a great school song. I see that time and time again I chose to feel intimidated and to interpret my colleagues’ words of support and suggestions as challenges and concerns. I spent many hours second-guessing myself and setting goals and parameters that were insurmountable, only to be devastated when I did not accomplish them. The process and journey was planned to be fun and joyful, but I spent a lot of it stressed and worried that my work was not going to be good enough.

Previous to this project, I had only minimal experience in the area of incorporating the arts into the general education classroom. I had completed a four-minute DVD slideshow with music for the third-grade class where I student taught, and I had written a class song with the first-grade classroom I had worked in. The lyrics were created in collaboration with the students, but the arrangement I put together from a music program on the computer. The arrangement was not my own original piece. Prior to that my only experience sharing my music writing was the instrumental piece of music I walked down the aisle to, and the song I wrote for my husband for our first dance. While they were well received, I had neither put the time nor the practice into developing as an artist in two years. It was not long before my confidence turned to concern as deadlines and the uncertainty of job security loomed.

Originally, I had planned to have the projects completed by May 2009; however, that did not happen. It was not until mid-May that I even had all of the video footage I needed to get working on the video yearbook. By that time, I had not even gone through
the 300 student surveys I had distributed to get ideas for lyrics to the school song. I know that fear and lack of confidence were the catalysts for why I procrastinated on my work, but I also had BTSA and Master’s coursework to complete while also trying to remain employed and effective as an educator to my 33 students. I was juggling too much and something had to give.

As the last week of school began, I knew that the work ahead of me was far more than I could complete by the last day of school. At this point in my journey, I had the sense to realize that the more I sat and stewed with the concerns and stress, the more it would impact all I was doing. I mustered up some courage and set up a meeting with my principal where first, I thanked him and the school site for all of their support on my projects, then I shared that my current timeline was no longer workable. We discussed a new timeline for sharing the completed school song and presenting the video yearbook. I walked out of his office with a newfound sense of ease and peace of mind. Communicating effectively and being responsible for what I was dealing with at the time gave me the empowerment I needed and the freedom to take the time to create the best work I could. I felt grateful and humbled.

In the process of completing my projects, one of the greatest challenges was that of losing my job and the uncertainty of securing another one. In December 2008, all was well. We had completed the second quarter and reached the halfway mark of the school year. It was not until I returned from our two-week break in early January that things began to change. As soon as school was back in session for the third quarter, rumblings
began both at my school site and around the school district concerning lay-offs. At our first staff meeting, my principal announced the positions for next year. As difficult as it was, he shared that all temporary positions, including mine, were open and that other teachers at my site who had seniority could accept the positions that were open. I also understood that I was not eligible to request any positions myself. So I sat for an hour in that meeting while the others worked hard to come up with the best possible set-up for the next year. It was excruciatingly painful to watch my community without being able to contribute. The tension and awkwardness in the room were palpable.

In early February, I received a welcomed and positive gleam of light amidst the chaos of the budget crisis. I was informed that I would, indeed, be able to keep my position at my current school site. Due to the fact that my position had been opened the previous year for all teachers in the district to interview before I could interview for it, the position was rightfully mine if I so chose. Yet only three days later two of my co-workers and I were called into the principal’s office. We were given our letters that read “end of contract May 29th, 2009.” This seemed absurd, but the ultimate hurt was when I received my official lay-off notice on March 6th. To make matters worse, there were talks and rumblings that our school site might be closed or that another school might join our site. I even had students coming up and asking what was going to happen. It was frustrating and difficult not to have answers for them.

Due to the budget crisis in California, factors both within the education system and beyond greatly impacted the trust and effectiveness of communities. The enrollment
at my school site went down; people lost jobs; and educators and the people all lost trust in the school districts and policymakers in the public education system. The communication between the district and our teachers was minimal and negative at its best moments. The tension and stress only amplified as the year went on, and in the year following, tensions and concerns continued to rise.

In June 2009, I accepted a position as a seventh grade Language Arts and Reading teacher and began a new journey at a new site, with a new community. I simultaneously continued to work on my projects while also establishing and developing myself as an active participant at my new site. I volunteered to work on Yearbook, work with the performing arts teacher on projects, and participate in the talent show. In addition, I took a great deal of time to participate in after-school activities and events that would help me get to know the new population with whom I worked.

In March 2010, the same rumblings of lay-offs began circulating throughout the district. More media coverage seemed to enhance the concern and highlight the large numbers of cuts and lay-offs that would ensue as a result of lack of funds. On March 15, some 22,000 teachers received lay-off notices within the state of California. As I did in the previous year, I continued to work hard amidst receiving another lay-off notice.

By May 2010, I had finished my second year of teaching, my second and final year of the BTSA program, cleared my credential, earned permanent status within my current district, completed my Master’s program, and completed coursework to earn a second Supplemental Credential in Social Sciences. Throughout the unsteady and
turbulent time in California’s public education system, I managed to remain employed as well as vastly increase my status as a highly qualified educator and to gain confidence as an educator, an individual, and an artist. It is through adversity, struggles, and challenges that I have experienced the greatest level of achievement and growth in myself both as an individual and an educator.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 contained a discussion of the methodology of narrative inquiry, my personal history, a description of the process and the projects, as well as the challenges and struggles encountered along the way. I completed the composition and lyrics to the school song and the production of the video yearbook to capture the historic first year of my elementary school’s existence. The goal for these projects was to recognize and support the building of a school community through the arts. I believe that happened.
Chapter 4

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Development of the Project

While the original ideas behind my project seemed simple enough, the work quickly took on a life of its own. From the project’s inception through its completion, I experienced many challenges and surprises, all of which contributed greatly to my range, scope, and growth as both an educator and an individual. It also made for a full and sometimes overwhelming experience. When I began the process of creating a school song and video yearbook, it all seemed like a lot of fun. It was easy to share my ideas and present them to my principal and staff, and it was well received and supported. There was no question as to my dedication and passion for integrating the arts and developing community within the site. However, the challenges came in the process of following through on my work.

I was truly surprised by the overwhelming enthusiasm and support I received on creating the school song. Yet, instead of focusing on completing one task at a time and thinking through the process, I allowed myself to be bombarded with personal concerns of self-confidence and balancing my time and commitment between this and other work to the extent that I felt disempowered and defeated by the project. I was surprised to see myself in such a state of overwhelm and worry about what I was doing. The result for several months was that I had writer’s block and was virtually inactive in the production of my culminating experience. On top of everything else, when I found out I was not
going to continue working at the school site, I felt like the deadline became that much more significant. I could not seem to get organized or clear about anything. A non-negotiable deadline to complete my research and create the video footage loomed. I felt so much doubt, fear, and worry that at times it seemed to paralyze me. It was mid-spring of that year when I realized I had to do it. All the variables were just that, and there was nothing I could do to change the status of my job or give myself more time than the last day of school, or take back the commitment I had made to my school site. I understood that with everything going on, I still had a choice, and my choice was to fulfill my word to complete these projects. Suddenly, I began working and was in action again. I collaborated with staff, students, and families to get the footage I needed for the video yearbook and for ideas to inspire the lyrics for the school song. I even discussed the timeline with my principal, and we worked out a plan that was actually more workable for everyone. This made accepting a new position a less difficult transition, because the communication with my first site remained intact.

While there were constraints and limitations to not being on site, there were great resources I had not anticipated at my new school. These included that I moved to a site that had an established performing arts program, and there was a teacher who produced a video yearbook at the conclusion of each school year. These resources and colleagues also supported the development and completion of my projects within the allotted time. As well, they welcomed me and provided numerous opportunities to expand my creativity and confidence in the arts.
Not until I nearly completed my work did I actually recognize and acknowledge that I had a limited amount experience in the area of writing songs and lyrics, and even less experience with video production. My recognition of this did not deter me from persevering, but it provided the awareness to see this project as an opportunity for me to feel freedom and see this experience as a process, rather than Grammy and Oscar caliber work. My confidence somehow had vanished when I became lost in the reality of the writing and producing process. I worried about “not being good enough,” instead of dealing with the fact that I was doing something I had never done before. Nevertheless, those colleagues and families within the school community rallied for me and supported me in the completion of my project. It was through partnership and camaraderie that I built the confidence to trust myself. The context had impacted the way I perceived myself as being capable. I began to understand that I needed to trust myself as much as others did. This was a profound moment in the process for me, as I found a new sense of strength and empowerment about myself that translated to all areas of my teaching. Yet, I still had to juggle teaching, BTSA, and my Master’s work. I had not anticipated the great deal of work and steep learning curve in being an educator. I had not taken into consideration the time and energy it would take to set up my own classroom, prepare effective rules/pedagogy/classroom management, and lesson plans, set up an effective and efficient grading process, and establish a home-school connection with the families of my students. Teachers have their own ways of setting up their classrooms, but I did not know what would go into creating the classroom environment I wanted. A large
component of my growth and development in my work came from reflecting upon the questions and inquiries I wanted to address in my project. The result was that my work vastly impacted my approach to teaching and my approach to life.

Reflection on the Success of the Project

I am clear that this work began as something fun; however, the project quickly became a personal challenge that I saw as something for me to prove to myself and to others. What it ultimately became, after much turmoil and personal searching and struggle, was a testament to a community who struggled and dealt with great adversity. The projects inspired and gave me the confidence to pursue the implementation of more creative work within my education classroom, as well as to further incorporate the arts into my classroom. Even more, it motivated me to work more closely as an advocate with the development and growth of arts programs and events within the public education school system.

There was a lot to be done during this project, and I had embarked on uncharted territory, which was equally terrifying and exhilarating. One of the reflections I made on my journey was how the process from initial conception to completion was a long and ever evolving one. Amidst pink slips, legal work, lay-offs, and accepting a new position as a seventh grade Language Arts and Reading teacher, I was able to give the finished projects to my first school site by May 2010. These projects not only helped me grow as an educator, but in my confidence as an artist and contributor in the arts to a larger community. This culminating experience has given me the gift of confidence in myself as
a songwriter and lyricist. Also, it has given me the opportunity to learn videography skills from my husband, who shares an affinity for the creative, visual, and performing arts. In a way it has helped me become more connected to my personal community as well as my professional one. The accomplishment and response from my work has inspired me to take on new avenues for participating in the arts at my subsequent site. I have choreographed for the performing arts students *Romeo and Juliet* scene work and helped prepare the advanced orchestra students for their spring concert. Additionally, I collaborated with teachers in participation on the annual school wide lip-sync contest and talent show. While I have completed my BTSA program and my Master’s, I am still facing the unsettling experience of lay-offs. Although I am not sure where I will be working in the future, I know that I will be able to make a difference in building my community through the arts.

**What Worked and What Might be Changed in Future Projects**

I am proud of the work accomplished in this culminating experience. The projects successfully brought together and commemorated an important moment of my first school site and its surrounding community. It also acknowledged all the administrators, educators, and families who worked together to establish a connected community, based on mutual respect, collaboration, the importance of character development, and the arts as necessary to a well-rounded educational experience for children.

In the future, I will take my confidence and courage into new projects by becoming more organized in developing a workable timeline, instead of sort of going
along with things as they unfold. I will also think twice before taking on so much at the same time. While I feel a great sense of accomplishment having completed all of the coursework and professional development over the past two years, I am looking forward to being able to focus more on specific projects, instead of having to divide my time and having so many places to be. I intend to work more closely in collaboration with my staff, administrators, students, and families in future endeavors.

Reflection on the Significance of the Project on Students and Others

When I reflect on the impact this project had on the school community, the first group I think about are the students. The school song and video yearbook both act as representations that commemorate and document the historical first year of the elementary school. Their creation allowed the students be a part of the school’s history and legacy and allowed them to partake in and build school spirit. It also provided opportunities to support the further development of their character as a key component of their educational experience. This work also commemorates the effort, collaboration, successes, and challenges with opening a new school, and it offers a thank you to each of the staff and members of administration for accepting me as a part of the community. The school song and video yearbook are representations of the impact and difference they make in the lives of the youth of the community, which, during this unstable time, should be acknowledged and celebrated more than ever.
Next Steps for Further Projects

In the future, I plan to continue to collaborate with performing arts educators while beginning to create and establish new opportunities for after-school activities, programs, and events that give students opportunities to sing, dance, and act. I will also continue to implement more opportunities for the arts in the general education classroom. On a more personal note, I plan to take piano and/or guitar lessons to build my skills as an artist, songwriter, and educator so I can share more music in the classroom and beyond.

Recommendations

In a time where there is abundant opportunity to access the voice of the individual, the focus has remained on the memorization and regurgitation of others’ works and thoughts. Instead, the essential task should be to incorporate the cultivation and development of students’ individual thoughts and contributions beyond textbooks and tests. Officials have created a single form of curriculum and then set expectations that teachers are mandated to uphold in a uniform format. Yet, to reach all their diverse learners, teachers must adapt and modify the curriculum. This rigid mandate demanded of teachers stifles their creativity and usurps their voice. Rarely is the teacher’s voice considered when forming policy in the public education system. To recap, educators are taught in their post baccalaureate programs to develop pedagogy for teaching to a diverse population, only to then be thrust into teaching a curriculum created by legislators who are not in the classroom and who have no direct contact with the student population for
which the curriculum has been decreed. Additionally, teachers are incessantly bombarded with criticism, even as their job stability is based on the statistics of high-stakes testing.

There is a vital need for a partnership between legislators and the people who work directly with the student population in the public education system. Perhaps if leaders at the state and federal level took some time to read the theories and ideas of Donald Arnstine and the positive power of giving the teachers a voice, many of the challenges faced in the public school system would no longer exist. Through understanding, dialogue, and give and take from both sides of the system, as Freire and Boal effectively established, educators, government, and communities can come together to produce something that is not only workable, but also will lead to a thriving future for today’s youth and future generations, one which includes the implementation and cultivation of the arts as an integral component of the educational experience.
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