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A Review Essay: Preparing Educators for Arts Integration

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Abstract

This 224-page book, woven together by editors Diaz and McKenna creates a five part tapestry of arts integration “success stories” from twenty-five different authors. This book offers an array of unique arts-based experiences, written from various geographical regions, and within diverse educational settings. In an era of the profit-driven standardized mentality of reform, the value of integrating creative arts into *all* aspects of education is in transforming “school culture” towards one that is more accessible, democratic, equitable, and empowering for the children we are dedicated to serving. The book provides recommendations for arts integration that are effective, strategic meaningful, and purposeful.

Art is fundamental, unique to each of us...Even in difficult economic times - especially in difficult economic times - the arts are essential.

– Maria Shriver, Award-Winning Journalist and Author

If you were to ask twenty-five different Arts Integration (AI) experts to express their views on concepts such as: *assessment, curriculum, creativity, and learning*, you would likely receive twenty-five different responses. This should not be taken as a negative thing. Rather, a myriad of responses (provided they are offered by those with a breadth of experience on the matter) would offer to educators and administrators more inclusive (widely accessible) points of entry for joining in the effort to create effective and meaningful k-12 experiences for all children. *Preparing Educators for Arts Integration: Placing Creativity as the Center of Learning* does precisely this. In this 224-page book, which is divided up into five parts, editors Diaz and McKenna weave together a tapestry of arts integration “success stories” from twenty-five different authors. As Jane Best writes in the Forward, this book,

(b)rings to the forefront empirical research, statewide models, and education training programs that provide successful approaches for arts-integration that address pedagogy, standards alignment, and professional development... (vii)

Indeed, as anyone in the AI field can attest, this is no easy feat. And yet, in this text are numerous examples that it can be done. The twenty-five voices in this edited book offer an array of unique arts-based experiences, written from various geographical regions, and within diverse educational settings. In other words, the recommendations made in this book are anything but standardized (and deliberately so). Creative teaching and learning cannot be standardized while also remaining authentic and sustainable. Maybe we cannot replicate, but we can learn from the experiences of others. And the stories of such experiences are at the heart of this book.

Part I focuses on multiple theories and practices in art education. Each author describes their balancing act between theoretical aesthetic generalities and program (or) standards particulars. As Charleroy and Paulson write in chapter two, “At the core of arts integration is the notion of alignment ... in the service of a common goal” (p. 29). That common goal is to create educational practices that are more relational and collaborative, and less compartmentalized and discrete. Part II offers examples of statewide models for arts integration. Readers learn of two major success stories, one from Oklahoma and one from Maryland. From these statewide models, readers can take away suggestions to develop similar models within their own states or communities. Part III explores ways in which educational leadership and arts integration can work together, fusing both into a trajectory that begins in preservice programs and extends

into administrative levels of school leadership. Such efforts call upon creative coordination between universities with local districts and various k12 disciplines. In Part IV, the authors discuss the necessary involvement of artists and art specialists in developing successful programs within the non-arts classroom. Using programs in Washington state, Colorado, South Carolina and Pennsylvania as examples, the authors, like Barnum in chapter XXX conclude, “that learning in and through the arts benefits teachers and improves their practice” (p. 125). Finally, in Part V, the reader gets a glimpse into the world of higher education professionals in Dance and other media, describing their respective programs and the effective ways these programs are empowering teachers. The authors call for collaboration between institutions and disciplines to grow authentic and sustainable partnerships that, according to author Bernstorff, “foster success for the entire continuum of learners” (p. 177).

There may be some educators and artists who (like myself) would challenge the notion put forth in several sections of the book that standards like the Common Core are beneficial to the goals of arts integration. I would have liked to have seen somewhere in the book a counter-argument for the arts in education as a vehicle for challenging (not aligning toward) current education reform policies (i.e art as resistance). Instead, the book leaves to the side discussions about the bigger policy debates, but perhaps that enables it to remain more focused on its own purpose in a clear and effective way. If I were to whittle down the entire book to one central message that is shared across all the chapters it would be this (as written in by Mears, O’Dell, Rotkovitz, and Snyder in chapter five): “When executed well, AI not only enhances pedagogical methodologies across the curriculum, but also supports education in discrete art forms and contributes to education reform *that changes school culture*” (p. 67-68, emphasis added). In an era of the profit-driven standardized mentality of reform, the value of integrating creative arts into *all* aspects of education is in transforming “school culture” towards one that is more accessible, democratic, equitable, and empowering for the children we are dedicated to serving. As a whole, the book provides recommendations for arts integration that are effective, strategic meaningful, and purposeful.

There is, at the book’s core, a set of values embedded within each of the approaches described; values built on the premise that neither shifting policies, nor state, local and federal funding negligence can stand in the way of creativity in the hands of passionate teachers and students. The book begins with strong theory, then illustrates successful strategies and models, and leaves us with a call to action: “Now is the time,” says Mears, O’Dell, Rotkovitz, and Synder, “Public opinion and the views of educational leaders are open to new thinking” (p. 73). As Diaz and McKenna write in the Introduction, “The arts have been shown to be intrinsically valuable” (p. 4) ...and so is this book.

About the Author

Morna McDermott is a professor in the College of Education at Towson University. Notable publications include *The Left Handed Curriculum* and *The Activists Handbook for the Education Revolution* (2012, IAP). She blogs at www.educationalchemy.com. Her scholarship and teaching focus on intersections between education policy, social justice and creativity/the arts.

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