

# ***INSPIRE***

## ***The Quest for Coherent Curriculum Through a Performing Arts-Focused Curriculum Integration Project***

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The author reports on the formation of a performing arts-focused curriculum integration project, in which key components of curriculum integration were employed within a project-focus involving the performing arts of music, theater, and dance. The project occurred within a curricular community partnership between a public school and nearby university and was designed with and for middle level students in an urban public school in the southeastern United States. The Inspire project is the result of a quest for curriculum coherence to support the exploration of intersections between separate discipline differentiation and curriculum integration within creative, collaborative, and critical thinking contexts. Project activities encouraged middle level students to consider and express the project theme of Black History Month from social and personal perspectives. Data indicate that students collectively and individually articulate their curricular and creative understanding from an arts-focused integration perspective.

The past decade has sparked dialogue on the survival of curriculum integration within standards based education policies (Pate, Thompson, & Keyes, 2001; Paterson, 2003; Vars, 2001; Vars & Beane, 2002). The United States standards movement is approaching new heights with the current development and tentative participation by 48 states of the Common Core Curriculum Standards, which Mathis (2010) argues may result in the creation of de facto national standards. Embedded in the cur-

rent standards movement is the federal government's aims to: (1) increase students' global competitiveness by raising core education standards and (2) through the U.S. Department of Education task force, Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills (2007), improve students' capacity for creativity and innovation; collaboration; critical thinking and problem solving; and communication. The partnership's recent release of skills maps in the core academic areas of the arts, social studies, geography, science,

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Middle Grades Research Journal, Volume 6(4), 2011, pp. 223–234  
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ISSN 1937-0814  
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English, and mathematics are designed to facilitate and enable the integration of twenty-first century skills into core subjects through the development of interdisciplinary themes, thereby generating possibility for diverse and innovative examples of student performance. Although the partnership describes an interdisciplinary approach, there is much potential for curriculum integration.

The partnership's skills map for the arts (2010a) supports the integration of the arts as a means to foster creativity and innovation, collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication. This represents an approach distinct from the Arts-in-Education federal grants over the past decade that supports the integration of the arts into other core subject areas. Instead of the arts integration approach, the partnership suggests an arts-focused interdisciplinary approach, which can be modified for arts-focused curriculum integration. There is much to learn and explore currently within the arts about these twenty-first century skills, which at later points can be integrated into other core subject areas.

I report in this paper on the formation of a performing arts-focused curriculum integration project designed for middle school students in an urban public school in the southeastern United States. Two motivating factors for the project were an ongoing curricular community partnership between a public school and a nearby research university and a quest for coherence by the public school's performing arts teachers in the areas of music, theater, and dance. The teachers wished to develop an innovative curriculum integration approach that would enable them and their students to explore and express in performative ways meanings of Black History Month as they were experiencing it in 2009.

## **BACKGROUND**

### ***Defining Curriculum Integration***

Curriculum integration is distinctly different from an interdisciplinary curriculum,

which Beane (1997) argued involves cross-curricular studies that make simplistic connections in different school subjects. Curriculum integration emerged from a need to create curricula distinct from elementary and secondary school curricula (Beane, 1993, 1997) that are "relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory" for middle school students (Andrews, Caskey, Anfara, 2007, p. 1). An interdisciplinary curriculum may not afford these opportunities.

Curriculum integration stems from a need to create a coherent curriculum. Dickinson (2001) described traditional approaches to curriculum design for early adolescents as inappropriate and disenfranchising students because it is "high circumscribed, high specialized curriculum, dominated by the perspectives of experts" (p. 10). Beane (1997), Vars and Beane (2002), Vars (2001), and Paterson (2003) concurred and argued that traditional approaches to curriculum are largely fragmented and not responsive to student needs. Beane (1995a) noted that a curriculum is not coherent if students do not experience a sense of purpose, unity, pertinence, and relevance to their everyday lives. Expanding this argument, Pate, Homestead, and McGinnis (1997) contended that a coherent curriculum "encompasses meeting the needs of students and teachers, connecting the content, encouraging student voice, and relating schooling to real life, thereby ensuring that student learning is relevant and personally meaningful" (p. xiii). The valuing of student voice, needs, and experience as core indicators of a coherent curriculum is at once democratic and political.

### ***Based on Genuine Student Questions***

Curriculum integration is comprised of key components. It is inquiry-based, tackling complex problems that have social and personalized meaning for participants. Beane (1993) stated, "The sources of curriculum ought to be problems, issues, and concerns posed by life itself" (p. 616), and that curriculum integration "is the search for self and social meaning" (p.

20). Beane (1997) believes real questions lie at the core of curriculum integration. The importance of real questions similarly drives the design and implementation of arts integration (Balick, 1999; Eisner, 2002; CapeUK, 2005; Weiss & Lichtenstein, 2008). Real world applications and the contextual application of knowledge is key (Beane, 2005; Burnaford, Aprill, & Weiss, 2001; Goldberg, 2006).

Themes of study organize the process of curriculum integration. The Turning Points publication (1989) from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development recommended the development of important universal themes that cut across disciplines in order to focus curricular standards. Pate (2002) stated, "Themes of study are developed around student interests and concerns with mandated content and skills are addressed within the themes" (p. 256). Beane (2005) added the organizing theme leads to the planning of significant activities to address the theme. The Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills (2009) recommended universal themes to be integrated into core subject areas.

### *Connections to Inquiry and Project-Based Learning*

Engaging in inquiry, asking real questions within real world contexts, and the development of core themes of study all occur within the context of project-based learning. Knoll (1997) noted that the formation of European polytechnic schools in the mid-nineteenth century gave birth to project-based learning and projects developed from the need for humans to interact with problems within their environment. Dewey (1900) believed that the process of considering problems humans experience and formulating possible, though not ultimate, solutions could be applied to project-based learning. Kilpatrick (1918) was an early advocate of project-based learning in the United States and argued the interests of the student drives the units or themes of study. The Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills (2010c) advocated inquiry focused project-

based learning as a means to address and interact with complex problems and changing environments.

Collaboration between students and teachers is another key component of curriculum integration. Beane (1997, 2005) stated that teachers need to collaboratively plan with students in order to generate real-life issues students experience that speak to the personal (a micro perspective) and the social (a macro perspective). Pate (2002) identified that in curriculum integration students and teachers collaborate and decide through consensus on "what is to be learned, why it is to be learned, how it is to be learned, and how it is to be assessed" (p. 256).

### *Erasing Curricular Boundaries*

Curriculum integration involves blending of subject disciplines. Kilpatrick (1918) argued students' engagement within a project essentially replaces the subject area as a focus. Beane (1995c) noted that each discipline of knowledge offers core knowledge in addition to a lens through which to view the world. Beane (1997) also insisted that discipline lines need to be disregarded in order to solve complex problems.

### *Content and Performance Standards Aligned With Curriculum Integration*

Pate, Thompson, and Keyes (2001) observed that curriculum integration within a standards culture serves seemingly divergent aims. It is this contradictory stance that best describes the tensions and possibilities of creating opportunity for integrated approaches within standardized approaches to curricula. Tensions exist when there is not perceived opportunity to integrate approaches. Detels (1999) observed a lack of interaction among arts specialists and between arts specialists and other disciplines due to an overemphasis on specified performance practice. Criticisms of curricula narrowing and overemphasis on specific student performance for assessment pur-

poses have existed throughout the era of No Child Left Behind and the current Common Core Curriculum Standards (Hess & Brigham, 2000; Mathis, 2003; National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy, 2003; National Education Association, 2004; Center for Educational Policy, 2006; Williams et al., 2010).

Current federal government initiatives support the duality and necessity of developing concurrent and overlapping contexts of core subject and integrated subject skills and abilities. The Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills (2007) noted “core subject knowledge is understood more deeply when approached via twenty-first century skills” (p. 8), and the integration of subject areas is supported by core subject skills. Brazee and Capelluti (1995) described curriculum as points on a continuum, with separate subject specialization at one end and wholly integrated curricula at the other. They argue doing both integrated and conventional curricula is entropic. Scripp and Subotnik (2003) believed that specific skill development within separate performing arts disciplines needs to precede integration with other subject areas. The Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills (2010) viewed the skills of differentiation and synthesis as necessarily and continuously intersecting in order to develop multiple perspectives and cognitive diversity in students (p. 10), so that they are able to “tolerate ambiguity and explore new realms of possibility” (2010a, p. 2).

### ***CONTEXT OF THE STUDY***

The Inspire project is an example of performing arts-focused curriculum integration, meaning the tenets of curriculum integration were employed within a project-focus involving the performing arts of music, theater, and dance. Inspire is not an arts integration study, which focuses on integration of the arts with other core subjects. Arts integration studies from the United States during the current era of standards-based curricula include focus on the

impact of arts integration on public school student scores on standardized tests (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999; Werner, 2002; Barry, Gunzenhauser, Montgomery, & Raiber, 2003; Ingram & Seashore, 2003; Tishler, 2007).

The Inspire project is the result of a quest for curriculum coherence from a variety of macro and micro perspectives. Within the field of arts education in the United States, Detels (1999) identified that it is rare to have specialist teachers in public schools in the four areas of music, dance, theater, and visual arts. The study took place during the first academic year (2008-2009) that the participating public school had secured funding for specialist teachers in these four arts areas.

Within the field of music education in the United States, a need exists for curriculum coherence through holistic integration of the national standards for music education in teaching practice. While these national standards were designed to generate comprehensive and multimodal learning experiences (Reimer, 2004; Jones, 2009), curricular preference by music educators for national standards pertaining to music performance (Schmid, 1996; Mahlmann, 1994; Reimer, 2004) has led to curriculum narrowing within school music teaching (Brewer, 2010; Thibeault, 2010) and piecemeal approaches to incorporating the broader-based standards (Conway, 2008). A need exists for enhanced integration of the national standards in music to create diversified and responsive performance practices. The Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills (2010b) advocated for the need to “align instruction with standards, particularly those standards that embody twenty-first century knowledge and skills” (p. 11).

The project occurred within a curricular community partnership that already existed between the public school and nearby university. The performing arts teachers from the participating study school wanted to diversify and integrate performance practices as a department, in addition to functioning as separate disciplines within the performing arts. They wanted to develop a performing arts-

focused curriculum integration project as a way to explore and express meanings of Black History Month for middle school students in the predominantly African American (97%) urban public school.

Graduate students in music education at the university elected to develop the project with the performing arts teachers. The graduate students had recently observed music performance workshop projects in the United Kingdom, including the Guildhall School of Music, that are designed to develop children's and adolescents' capacity for creativity, innovation, collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication within culturally diverse contexts. The graduate students had incorporated these ideas with an undergraduate class at the university. They wanted to further develop these ideas within the Inspire project.

The performing arts teachers and graduate students created structures to allow for curricular integration to happen on small, medium, and larger scales in order to support contradictory needs for separate discipline skill development and curriculum integration and moreover develop the theme from a variety of perspectives. Small-scale integration focused on integrating the national standards within a performance context in the performing arts teachers' own classrooms. This also allowed for specific skill development. Medium scale integration combined small groups of students from different performing arts classes. Larger scale integration allowed for whole classes to group together and collaborate.

### ***Research Questions***

The unique circumstances leading to the project inception, design, and experience of curricular integration within a performing arts focus shaped the research question for the study: What are the formative and experiential dimensions of the Inspire project? Other important questions emerged as part of the curriculum integration process. The question that brought the performing arts teachers to the

project was "How can we enable our students to experience, explore, and express in performative ways meanings of Black History Month in 2009?" The question that emerged for students engaged in the project was "What does Black History Month in 2009 mean to me?"

## ***METHOD***

### ***Theoretical Perspective***

This study's design incorporates Guba and Lincoln's (1989) conception of *fourth generation evaluation*, in which participants are viewed as stakeholders in the process of the study. Theoretically, all participants in the study are stakeholders. However, I focused upon the performing arts teachers as the primary stakeholders in the study. Guba and Lincoln maintain stakeholders bring different value perspectives, are groups at risk, are users of evaluation information, are mutually educated by the process, and are inherently interactive with the researcher. The performing arts teachers embody these aspects: they bring different value perspectives as musician, dance, and theater artists and educators.

Their willingness to participate and make significant changes to their curriculum makes their developing practice vulnerable. The study design made the teachers the primary users of the evaluation information. Frequent interactions during both stages of the study enabled informal sharing of data findings. During one of the interviews with the performing arts teachers, the teachers described my evaluative interaction with them as "She is our living journal."

### ***Participants***

Participants in the project included 94 middle school students in grades six through eight; five performing arts teachers in the areas of band, chorus, general music, theater, and dance; three graduate students; seven volun-

teer undergraduate students; and five performing artists from the community. As principal-investigator, I was an active participant-observer in the project. I was new to the southeastern United States, the university, and the partnership, thereby providing a fresh investigator perspective to the project.

### ***Data Collection***

The study took place from October 2008 to March 2009 and consisted of two phases. The first phase occurred from October to December 2008. In this initial phase, the university team of graduate students, a senior liaison faculty member, and I met regularly with the performing arts teachers at their school. This group met biweekly to engage in musical and theatrical activities designed to develop creative, collaborative, and communication capacities and discussed approaches for integrating these capacities into performing arts contexts. As well, the group planned for the small, medium, and large integration structures.

The second phase occurred from January 2009 to March 2009, in which middle school students engaged and developed the project with the performing arts teachers, university students, and performing artists from the community. The five performing arts classes took place at the same time every day, giving opportunity for integration. The university team and performing arts teachers met weekly during the second phase to share student experiences and plan future steps for integration. The culmination of the project was a public performance in which the groups performed together.

### ***Field Notes and Interviews***

This study is qualitative and employs the data sources described below. Field notes were taken throughout both phases, during and after meetings and classroom instruction. Semi-structured focus group interviews were also conducted with student groups, performing

arts teachers, and the graduate students. Four students from each of the five performing arts classes were interviewed at the midpoint of their winter 2009 project. Each group was heterogeneously balanced by gender. The music teachers, drama and dance teachers, and graduate students were interviewed at the midpoint of the project and shortly after the final project performance.

Each group brought a unique perspective: the three music teachers each had unique pedagogic and professional music experience; the drama and dance teachers had extensive experience integrating other performing arts within their professional performance careers; and all of the graduate students had taught in urban public school settings in addition to their experiences in the United Kingdom. Dyadic interviews were conducted in the final phase of the study with a key faculty member at the Guildhall School of Music in the United Kingdom and a former graduate of the Guildhall's innovative Music Leadership program. This was done to obtain a deeper understanding of the pedagogy involved with designing performing arts experiences that embed creativity, innovation, collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication within culturally diverse contexts.

### ***Data Analyses***

The data analyses for the detailed field notes and semistructured interview transcriptions included the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which one section of data was compared with another to determine any similarities or differences. The first analysis stages involved constant reading and rereading of data over time, noticing and thinking about phenomena, coding of data, and identification of initial themes. These initial themes were shared informally with the graduate students and performing arts teachers as part of the feedback and discussion shared during scheduled and informal meetings throughout the project. Later stages included refining

the codes, which enabled categories and developed themes to emerge from the data.

The collected data were organized in a database according to the categories and themes and have been analyzed and cross-analyzed to the point of saturation. Following data analyses, I met with the performing arts teachers to share the findings, garner their perspective of the project from that point, and discuss which data were useful for their teaching. These meetings also enabled them to revisit and discuss difficulties associated with incorporating separate discipline skill development and arts-focused curricular integration. Guba and Lincoln (1989) described these activities as analysis strategies that close the data circle.

### ***Limitations***

The study took place in one school with a single student and performing arts teacher population; and involved a curriculum integration program focused solely on the arts versus other disciplines or subject areas. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalized to other schools, other arts programs, or any other curriculum integration programs. I investigated only the first year of the Inspire project, when currently the project has been sustained for 3 years at the school. The interview data with Connect artistic director, Sean Gregory, provide insight into creative and innovative approaches to arts-focused curriculum integration. However, Inspire projects are independent of Connect projects and continue to develop their own identity.

Finally, interviews with student focus groups took place only in the middle of the project. It was intended they would be interviewed a second time towards the end of the project. However, the culminating task of the final performance for the project dominated class time in the final week. The weeks following the final performance were dedicated to state standardized testing, and students were unable to be interviewed during this time period.

### ***FINDINGS***

Findings focus on the following areas: (1) the importance of the integration of the arts as a means to foster creativity, innovation, and collaboration; (2) difficulties young adolescents find in processing meaning of relevant questions they have asked; and (3) students' articulation and expression of the experience of arts-focused curriculum integration.

### ***Fostering Creativity, Innovation, and Collaboration***

It is critical to recognize that the Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills is a means by which to integrate the skills of creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking into core subjects, including the arts, as a means to generate diverse and innovative examples of student performance. The partnership may provide a means for the survival of curriculum integration within standards-based education policies. In addition, workshop projects entitled *Connect* at the Guildhall School of Music served as a model for developing Twenty-First Century Skills within culturally diverse contexts. Gregory's (one of the participants) comments speak to the need for arts-focused integration within education and performance contexts:

[Connect is] enlightened and it's innovative and it gives, it presents lots of new opportunities and new ideas. Also artistically the music it produces, the work it produces ... it's cross-discipline now ... working with dance, with visual arts with theater and also the cross-cultural aspect... It's the processes that are undertaken are different and they enable new and exciting work to come out that you wouldn't see anywhere else. And almost the [music] industry as it is doesn't allow these things to happen. Everything is a bit ... is so pigeon-holed. It's not just education, but also artistically.... We're keen now to join everything up as much as possible ... What comes through Connect, and it should be the case for all these sorts of projects, is

that it really informs the cultural and artistic landscape of the future.

During the final sharing of findings with the performing arts teachers, the dance teacher spoke to the need for students in the different performing arts areas to collaborate in small groups in order to develop creative and innovative work. While large classes had collaborated during the project, the teacher expressed a need for smaller integrated student groups to develop:

If we created more [creative] environments leading up to our performances, you know where they feel safe. Creating smaller numbers... Maybe pulling five [students] from [each performing arts class] and then putting them into a room together to see what they come up with."

The idea of having multiple opportunities to develop innovative performance through a process of collaboration emerges from these data sources.

### ***Students' Difficulties Processing Meanings of Their Relevant Questions***

While Beane (1993, 1997) believes that real questions generated by students based upon their search for self and social meaning should drive curriculum integration, these data indicate students had difficulty answering their question: "What does Black History Month mean to me in 2009?" This question embodied the theme of the project. Focus group data revealed middle school students experienced difficulty articulating what their exploration of the theme of Black History Month meant to them. Many student responses revealed a traditional historical perspective.

One focus group student was almost overcome by emotion at the question when she considered its meaning for her. The dance teacher suggested the project and the exploration of its theme "has been a whirlwind and I don't think it will sink in for them until they are done." Students who articulated answers

said they were able to "express ourselves more" and develop their personal identities. A male student referring to President Obama and Martin Luther King, Jr. remarked: "They just wanted us to be more." The middle school students each articulated a single idea when answering this question, which may suggest they conceptualize one dimension at a time of a complex construct such as the personalization of Black History Month.

### ***Students' Articulation And Expression Of Arts-Focused Curriculum Integration***

The performing arts teachers identified that arts-focused curriculum integration requires simultaneous processing of and engagement within different performing arts practices. The theater teacher noted: "We're creating characters, so we have to do the most research overall." S/he describes how students need to develop simultaneously "the story and the movement with the story." The theater students generated the story by watching the dancers and developed an historical African queen character and story for the dancers to dance to. The dance teacher remarked how the students were excited about the dance and the story and "could see the significance of that piece and what it meant, because they are actually processing Queen Nzinga and dancing for her."

The middle school students in the theater class continue to tell the story in the project and create their own movement to personalize their perspective. A PhD student describing the theater teacher and her students' work says it was "really acting more so as the glue ... because in particular her students and their performance is interwoven essentially from start to finish ... and that's sort of the connecting fiber." Beane (1995) believes there must be a socially determined glue to hold together an integrated curriculum. In this project, the glue is the ability to identify with multiple perspectives through performance practice. Speaking about the students developing an African

dance and drumming experience, the dance teacher noted:

You can perform African music to recorded music, but there's something that's missing, there's a big piece that's missing so it needs live music. And for me as a dancer, who plays [drums], it helps them to understand the movements better and to understand the music better ... I think it's gonna enhance their connection to the whole piece. The [students from other Inspire classes] that come to my room to drum, teaching them to play for choreography is different than just teaching them how to play a song because they actually have to be engaged in the process every single time. They can't zone out and just play one part. They can't zone out and just look at a piece of sheet music. They have to actually watch the dancers and see what the dancers are doing, 'cause their movements go right along with the music.

The theater and dance teacher are proficient in more than one performing arts focus and are experienced in Afro-centric genres. They provided strong modeling, which may be why the majority of the curricular integration experiences occurred with these groups. The focus group data from the dance and theater students indicate students are experiencing simultaneous processing of and engagement within different performing arts practices. Dance students describe through speech and song the process of telling the story through dance in the following interview dialog:

Girl 2: We've been learning, like, how to tell stories and stuff, like African....

Boy 1: They say tell a story.

Girl 2: What do they see? [she sings these words]

Boy 1: What do they see? [he sings these words]

Girl 1: What do you see when you tell a story?

Principal Investigator: Tell a story through dance.

The theater students describe the integration of dance and storytelling into their performance practice:

Boy 1: We're making up stories of how African dance was so traditional.

Girl 1: Most of us do, we already take, we've taken dance once or we're taking it now. And we're basically incorporating it in [into their theater performance practice]

A boy in the dance class who has been dancing to the African rhythms played by students on drums identifies himself as "the next perfect drummer." Underneath the section of dialogue that followed, he tapped complex African rhythms. The same boy describes his experience when the dance class collaborated with the band class to create original music and movement: "I would try and picture what they're playing to the dance that we're doing."

The data indicate students are able to engage with and can negotiate overlapping performance arts practices. Beane (1997) argues that discipline lines need to be disregarded within curriculum integration. This project demonstrated that there is blending of performing arts disciplines in order to create desired artistic results. In the process, it appears some students adopted multiple artistic identities and practices.

## **DISCUSSION**

### ***Significance***

The study is significant for several reasons. The Inspire project is an example of an arts-focused curriculum integration project that embeds the Partnership for Twenty-First Century Skills. I collected qualitative interview data that provide concrete examples of collaboration and communication for the purpose of fostering creativity and innovation. The project may be construed as a quest for coherent curriculum within standards based education policies, which is a perspective that contrib-

utes to current debates in education in the United States.

The study also contributes to the dialogue on curriculum integration. This curriculum integration experience supports the viability of student-generated inquiry within complex and real-world contexts that develop students' self and social identities. I found the students' responses to their question "What does Black History Month mean to me in 2009?" to be inherently complex. Students were able to address verbally only one dimension of the question at a time. However, through strong teacher modeling and facilitation, students demonstrated ability to process and engage within simultaneous performing arts practices. As a result, they were able to develop innovative ways to interpret and develop the project theme.

The implications of the study for education include the idea that arts-focused curriculum integration is a viable approach for developing Partnership for Twenty-First Century skills within the performing arts. My findings indicate the blending of performing arts discipline lines give students multiple entry points for experience. Finally, for innovative thought and practice to develop, there needs to be multiple opportunities for collaboration and communication within large and small student groupings.

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