Integrating the Visual Arts into Writing: Effects on Student Learning and Engagement

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Abstract

By conducting a qualitative study, the impact of visual arts in writing for students was investigated. A literature review analyzed existing data supporting the incorporation of the visual arts into the writing curriculum. Two open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with classroom teachers to gain insight on their opinions and classroom practices regarding the visual arts and writing. A third participant offered insights of visual arts integration into writing through written correspondence. Results revealed that all three participants agreed that visual arts integration in writing had a positive effect on student engagement. An investigation into how student learning was impacted by visual arts integration into writing yielded positive yet inconclusive results. Participants offered insight on effective strategies and barriers in their classrooms relating to the integration of visual arts into the writing curriculum. The data gathered in the study can be used to inform educators the impacts of integrating the visual arts into the writing curriculum.
Acknowledgements

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the Research Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Topic/Questions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Researcher</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Literature Review</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing in Schools Today</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating the Visual Arts into Writing</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Learning</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Engagement</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Arts Integration for Struggling Writers</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to Successful Art Integration</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. Methodology</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruments of Data Collection</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection and Analysis</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Review Procedures</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. Findings</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Attitudes Toward Programming for Visual Arts Integration</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Effective Strategies Integrating Visual Arts into Writing

Student Learning

Increased Understanding of Concepts

Quality of Work

Addressing Different Needs in Writing

Struggling Writers

Authentic Learning

Student Engagement

Art as a Motivator for Writing

Self-Expression

Transferability of Skills

Barriers for Integration

Chapter 5. Discussion

Overview

Impact on Engagement

Impact on Learning

Implications/Recommendations

Limitations

Further Study

References

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview
Integrating the Visual Arts into Writing: Effects on Student Learning and Engagement

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

Literacy is the foundation of education, as the ability to read and write empowers students in their academic pursuits. Everyday, teachers strive to deliver effective lessons that develop children’s literacy skills. A major factor in the effectiveness of lessons relates to student interest and engagement. As a result, people within the education field are constantly evaluating teaching strategies to determine how effective they are in promoting student engagement and learning. A particular focus highlights the role that art plays in student engagement. This study investigated how visual arts can be integrated into writing lessons to promote students’ engagement and learning.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the integration of the visual arts into children’s writing, hereafter also known as visual arts-writing integration. Teachers constantly struggle to engage students in literacy activities, especially ones involving writing. As a result, investigating motivators to address student engagement in literacy-related activities can inform teachers of effective practices to implement in their classroom. Previous studies have suggested students are highly motivated by the arts due to its potential for self-expression (Leigh, 2012; Olshansky, 1994). Several studies have examined efforts of visual arts-writing integration, suggesting that involving visual arts during the writing process can have positive results on student engagement (Leigh, 2012; Trainin, Andrzejczak & Poldberg, 2006). Researchers noticed an improvement in the quality of students’ writing and drawing, as well an increased knowledge of vocabulary and comprehension (Leigh, 2012; Olshansky, 1994; Norris, Mokhtari & Reichard, 1998; Trainin,
Andrzejczak & Poldberg, 2006). Insight on integrating the visual arts when teaching writing was gathered from three participants. The effects of visual arts-writing integration on student engagement and learning were analyzed. A further analysis was also conducted to determine the most effective ways of integrating visual arts into writing as well as barriers for successful visual arts-writing integration. These findings can be used as a resource for teachers who are interested in knowing more about teaching the literacy curriculum using a visual arts integrated approach.

**Research Questions**

This study looked at how teachers can integrate visual arts in their classrooms and its impact on student engagement and learning. The research focused on the following five sub-questions:

1. How is student engagement affected when teachers integrate visual arts into writing?
2. How are students’ academic and non-academic learning affected when teachers integrate visual arts into writing?
3. What are some successful strategies that teachers use when integrating visual arts into their writing program?
4. What are some barriers teachers face when trying to integrate the arts and writing and how do they overcome these obstacles?
5. What implications are there for other teachers who would like to use visual arts-writing integration in their own classrooms?

**Background of the Researcher**

As a child, I was fortunate to have excelled at reading and writing due to both school and parental support, but many others were not as fortunate as I was. From my experiences as a student and an educator, I believe that it is imperative that we find effective strategies to teach literacy to students so that they can become successful individuals. Additional research into
effective strategies in teaching writing is critical, as it is often an aspect of literacy that students struggle with.

During my undergraduate studies in Early Childhood Education and teaching experiences in various schools, childcares and community settings, I became immersed in teaching arts and crafts and music to the children I worked with. They were highly motivated and interested in lessons that related to the arts. I realized then how the arts could support children’s learning.

As a result, I was interested in discovering the potential of the visual arts when integrated with particular subject areas in the school curriculum. This study offered some insight into this potential by focusing on visual arts integration and its impact on children’s writing.

**Overview**

There are five chapters in this thesis, which describe the research in detail. Chapter one provided an overview of the study, stating the purpose of the study, research questions and background of the researcher. Chapter two consisted of a literature review, which analyzed previous research related to this topic. The review looked at the visual arts as a motivator for learning. Then, the role of visual arts in the writing process was evaluated using previous studies. Chapter three described the methodology and procedure used in the study, as well as information about the participants, ethical concerns and data collection methods. Chapter four provides an analysis of data gathered on the effects of integrating the visual arts in writing. Chapter five discussed and provided conclusive statements on the data analysis, considered limitations of the study, and gave recommendations for future teaching practices and future research studies. References and a list of appendices follow the end of this study.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing in Schools Today

Olshansky described the traditional writing curriculum as one that was “cut from the same cloth” (2008a). Students were taught with a program that was geared towards the verbal learner, and did not account for other types of learners who were kinesthetic, visual or tactile (Olshansky, 2008a). Olson (as cited in Olshanky, 2008a) warned us that as a result, children who were not verbal learners were at risk to perform poorly academically, socially and emotionally if taught using the traditional writing curriculum. Since early literacy is a strong predictor for future academic performance, Olshansky (2008b) believed that the writing curriculum must accommodate for all types of learners.

The Arts as a Motivator for Writing

“I’m noticing that when I draw, I respond with awe. I see things. I always get the words from the picture, so I can write words I feel in my heart” (Leigh, 2012, p. 296). Perhaps this quote is one that best summarized the purpose and possibilities that art has in learning. The role that art has had in academia has been a subject of debate within the educational community. Schools constantly struggled with the idea of minimizing the time occupied by art lessons or eliminating the art program as a whole based on the need to focus more on the three Rs of academics- Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic (Olshansky, 2008b; Albers, Dooley, Flint, Holbrook & May, 2012). However, studies revealed contrary evidence to this practice. Empirical evidence provided in Wilhelm’s and Burger and Winner’s studies suggested that art was a motivator for student engagement and learning, especially in the area of writing (as cited in Trainin, Andrzejczak & Poldberg, 2006). For students who were less proficient and effective in writing, a rich, visual arts-integrated environment nurtured growth in writing, as well as gains towards other academic goals (Trainin, Andrzejczak & Poldberg, 2006). Hubbard urged teachers
who valued learning through text to look at visual arts for more than what it was (as cited in Olshansky, 1994). It was an effective visual tool that children used to problem-solve, make sense of the world and to express their ideas and visions (Olshansky, 1994).

**Integrating the Visual Arts into Writing**

The evidence suggesting positive impacts of visual arts-writing integration on student learning and engagement is overwhelming. Studies have cited increased academic and non-academic learning and engagement throughout the writing process. Benefits of visual arts integration into writing include, but are not limited to overall writing performance, impact on engagement, and skill development.

**Impact on Learning.** Many researchers believed visual arts and writing had an equally important role in creating meaning in student’s work (Olshansky, 1994; Trainin, Andrzejczak & Poldberg, 2006). Trainin, Andrzejczak and Poldberg (2006) attempted to understand this partnership through the Vygotskian cognitive hypothesis. The hypothesis assumed that visual arts allowed for a wide range of expression that was not readily available in language (Trainin, Andrzejczak & Poldberg, 2006). This non-verbal method of expression helped support the development of higher order cognitive functions, which were often needed in writing (Trainin, Andrzejczak & Poldberg, 2006). As children developed the skills to generate writing from these pictures, their written product became more coherent and complex (Trainin, Andrzejczak & Poldberg, 2006). The study subsequently conducted by Trainin, Andrzejczak and Poldberg (2006) showed findings consistent with their theory. They observed that students who made visual representations of their work used more vivid descriptions and vocabulary, showed more organized thinking and had more developed ideas in their writing (Trainin, Andrzejczak & Poldberg, 2006).
A further study conducted by Norris, Mokhtari and Reichard (1998) implemented the picturing writing process in classrooms, where students were required to create pictures in the pre-writing process before beginning the writing aspect of the task. Findings revealed that when compared with students who were asked to write without the use of drawings, students that used the picturing writing process scored higher in all four measures of writing achievement—number of words, length of sentences, coherent ideas and overall writing grade (Norris, Mokhtari & Reichard, 1998).

Beth Olshansky utilized another similar visual arts integration strategy called image making during the writing process. This strategy addressed children’s various learning styles by involving steps that accommodate visual, kinesthetic, and verbal learners (Olshansky, 1994). The first step, paper making, encouraged students to imagine images and patterns within the textured paper they created. These imagined pictures then helped generate ideas for character and setting, and acted as the basis for their story (Olshansky, 1994). The next step in the process required students to create multiple drawings from generated ideas, which were then used as prompts for the writing of the story (Olshansky, 1994). Finally, children were encouraged to revisit the images that they created during the editing process to review their completed story (Olshansky, 1994). The most important feature of this process was to allow freedom for students to move between the visual and written aspects of their story (Olshansky, 1994). This freedom generated organized yet detailed stories, depicting children’s feelings and ideas through pictures and text (Olshansky, 1994). Olshansky (2008a) noticed a huge development in students’ vocabulary as a result of students describing their art in writing or sharing thoughts and ideas with peers.

Another benefit of visual arts-writing integration was its potential in helping students develop certain skills that are necessary in their everyday lives. Research suggested image and text often worked together to encourage children to become critical and reflective thinkers.
To have students look at pictures and words in books in order to understand and interpret the author’s emotions and ideas through a visual and written response is a complicated process that requires comprehension of artistic and literary concepts (Carger, 2004; Leigh, 2012). However, teachers fostered this skill by encouraging students to see and use the visual arts and writing together. Carger (2004) and Trainin, Andrzejczak and Poldberg (2006) noticed that educators who frequently used an effective “art talk” strategy in analyzing books encouraged students to use a wide range of relevant but complex vocabulary. These discussions helped increase students’ ability to think and talk critically and reflectively about the work of others as well as their own (Carger, 2004).

Impact on Engagement. Olshansky (2006) also conducted another arts-integrated writing approach called picturing writing. This process also highlighted the use of visual arts in the pre-writing stages. Students were encouraged to create artistic pieces before writing to help them develop keywords and ideas that were important to the topic (Olshansky, 2006). These keywords – also known as silver dollar words – were then used during the writing process to facilitate writing. Olshansky (2006) noticed that after implementing the picturing writing approach, there was an increase in student’s investment of time, confidence and sense of purpose in the writing task, which contributed to students’ overall engagement in writing. This process helped students immensely with writing detailed stories that stayed on topic. One of the children quoted, “writing used to be hard, but now it is easy. I listen to my words to see if they match with my story and they always do” (Olshansky, 2006, p.530).

Norris, Mokhtari and Reichard (1998) further determined enthusiasm caused by an opportunity to utilize drawings to aid writing as a factor for higher scores in writing achievement. This is also supported by Trainin, Andrzejczak and Poldberg (2006), whose study revealed that students who first did drawings and then initiated a writing task had higher levels of
engagement in the task itself, which led to an overall improvement in writing. This reiterated the importance of using the visual arts as a form of student motivation and engagement to encourage writing development as well as its valuable role within the writing curriculum.

**Visual Arts Integration for Struggling Writers**

Evidence suggested that struggling writers, such as English Language Learners or at-risk students – students who were at-risk of completing their education – benefit even more from the incorporation of arts into learning (Bussert-Webb, 2001 and Carger, 2004). Carger’s (2004) study examined the benefits of visual arts in bilingual children, and noted that pictures and drawings often helped children bridge the linguistic and cultural gap experienced at home and at school. In addition, students who struggled with writing often were overwhelmed by the task of expressing ideas through text (Carger, 2004). Visual arts can be used to encourage students to make connections to prior experiences and content knowledge, acting as a basis for the transfer of ideas into text (Carger, 2004).

Bussert-Webb (2001) proposed that for at-risk students, arts provided a way of expressing emotions and experiences that might otherwise be too personal to be translated into words. Bussert-Webb’s (2001) study of at-risk students allowed participants to initially express themselves through symbolic drawings due to their reluctance in writing about their experiences. This helped establish rapport between the researcher and participants, who then became more open to participating in the researcher’s activities (Bussert-Webb, 2001). Eventually, these students were willing to complete tasks relating to writing, revealing details about their lives through a combination of drawings and text (Bussert-Webb, 2001). It was evident that the visual arts not only played a role in developing the students’ writing skills, but also their trust and sense of belonging in the learning community.
Barriers to Successful Visual Arts Integration

Perhaps the biggest question that visual arts integration poses is whether this approach will result in higher academic achievement (Rooney, 2004). Previous studies conducted were inconclusive, and as a result, it is hard for the parents, principals and the school to be on board with the idea (Rooney, 2004) At times, this might result in negative attitudes towards the role of the arts in schools, which could act as a barrier to visual arts-writing integration (Albers, Dooley, Flint, Holbrook & May, 2012; Olshansky, 2008b). These individuals advocated for the “teaching to the test” approach, which emphasized the standard methods of learning only through text (Olshansky, 2008b). As a result, art became an often-neglected aspect of the curriculum or was almost entirely eliminated from the school day (Albers, Dooley, Flint, Holbrook & May, 2012; Olshansky, 2008b). This study addressed this issue by highlighting effective teaching practices incorporating the visual arts and writing that engaged and motivated children, and helped address the diverse learning needs usually observed in a typical classroom.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Procedure

This qualitative research study investigated the effects of integrating the visual arts into children’s writing. A qualitative approach was taken in order to provide naturalistic and in-depth insight into the strategies and practices that teachers used when incorporating the visual arts into the writing curriculum.

The literature review was conducted to reveal existing information regarding the importance of visual arts-writing integration and the effects of integrating the visual arts into student writing. The review analyzed art as a motivator for learning, the ways that the visual arts impacted student engagement and learning, and the strategies and barriers of visual arts-writing integration.

The review provided the context for the interview portion of this study. A face-to-face interview was conducted with two primary school teachers, who all consented to the meeting through email contact. A third participant provided first-hand information through email correspondence. A list of questions was constructed, pertaining to the individual’s classroom practices. Particular questions focused on classroom practices integrating the visual arts into writing, and the teacher’s opinions of the effectiveness of visual arts-writing integration. These interviews were analyzed in order to answer the main research questions mentioned earlier in the study.

Instruments of Data Collection

Open-ended, semi-structured, informal interviews were conducted for the purpose of this study. Turner (2010) suggested that this approach allowed for participants to give in-depth information about their opinions and experiences due to the flexibility of the interview’s
structure. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes in length. A question and answer method involving text correspondence was also used as a data collection method for one of the participants. This was due to the geographical challenges that were presented as well as the participant’s preference for email as the method of correspondence. The data gathered gave insight to the following topics: educational background of the participants, beliefs about the effects of visual arts-writing integration towards student engagement and learning, and strategies and challenges for visual arts-writing integration. The beginning questions gave a sense of the participant’s experiences in teaching, as well as their teaching practices in the classroom. A sample question from this section was: “What is a typical day in your classroom like?” (Appendix A). The next section attempted to gain an understanding of the participant’s viewpoints in regards to the effects of visual arts and visual arts-writing integration on student engagement and learning. The next section prompted teachers to identify effective teaching strategies and challenges relating to visual arts-writing integration. For example, a question asking for specific teaching experiences where the visual arts was used or integrated in conjunction specifically with writing elicited first-hand experiences from the participants. Finally, participants were given an opportunity to provide additional comments to the interview. For a full list of questions used in the interview, refer to Appendix A.

Participants

The three participants of this study recognized the importance of student engagement as a driving force for success in learning. They were aware of the benefits that art had on learning, and utilized the arts – specifically the visual arts – in delivering their literacy curricula. They are referred to as Catherine, Zara and Sarah in this study – all pseudonyms. Catherine has been teaching in the Canadian public school system for 26 years, and has taught all the grades from Junior Kindergarten to grade three. She currently works in an arts-focused school. Zara has
taught extensively in the Canadian independent and public school systems for almost 30 years. She strongly believes in using the arts to deliver a literacy curriculum in her classroom. Sarah has had extensive experience teaching various grades in the American school system. She has a particular interest in delivering arts integrated programs to students.

These participants were chosen based on their expertise in visual arts integration, and were connections and referrals from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education’s Master of Teaching program or were connections made by the researcher. The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. They have strong background knowledge on visual arts integration and the literacy curriculum.
2. They integrate or have integrated the visual arts in teaching writing to children in their classroom.

Participants required knowledge of visual arts integration and the delivery of the literacy curriculum in a classroom as the participant could identify whether there were benefits of using the visual arts in their classroom as well as the most effective practices when using visual arts-writing integration. In addition, participants needed to have incorporated visual arts in teaching writing to children to provide informed, practical data to the study. Participants who have had experience with the integration of visual arts in teaching writing provided valuable accounts of personal experiences as well as opinions on the effectiveness of this teaching method.

Data Collection and Analysis

The three interviews conducted were all recorded – either in audio or written form – upon consent from the participants. Audio recordings were then transcribed to facilitate the analysis of data. During the analysis, coloured-coding was used to identify similar and differentiating data. The information was grouped by the following themes: strategies for integrating the visual arts
into writing, effect on student engagement and learning, and challenges for integration.

Coloured-coding helped highlight important quotes and opinions on visual arts-writing integration. The information was then translated to a chart to analyze trends and generate overarching themes. Extrapolating from this information revealed the impact of visual arts integration into writing on student engagement and achievement, provided effective teaching practices when integrating the visual arts and writing, and identified barriers to successful visual arts-writing integration.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

To ensure ethical research practices are followed throughout the whole study, several measures were taken, mostly to respect the rights of the participants and to address their needs and concerns. The first step in this process required email consent from the participants to conduct the interview at an agreed time and location. Participants were informed of the research process through email, and had the opportunity to ask any questions before the interview. Prior to the meeting, a letter of consent stating the research process, risks, and rights of the participants was given to the interviewee and signed (Appendix B). When conducting the interviews, participants were again reminded that they could withdraw participation from this study at any time, and that any questions or concerns would be addressed. They were also reminded that their identity would remain anonymous through the use of a pseudonym. After the interviews were conducted and digitally recorded – in audio or written format – they were stored on the researcher’s personal computer, which is encrypted for security purposes. Interviews were transcribed, stored on the local drive and sent only to the participant at their request. At this point, participants were given the option of informing the researcher of any comments that they would like to add, remove or clarify. Participants were also informed that they could request a
copy of the final report, and records of the data they provided would be destroyed upon the completion of this study.

**Limitations**

While this research study offered insight into visual arts-writing integration, there were several limitations to consider. The Master of Teaching program at the University of Toronto requires students to complete their research study within a time frame of two school years. This constraint in time made it challenging to conduct a quantitative research study to evaluate students’ literacy skills after implementing a program that integrated visual arts into literacy learning. This study would have required a longer time frame in order to create and conduct the experiment and analyze results.

Another limitation to the research was the small sample size of this study. By interviewing only three participants, the variety of data available from the interviews was limited. With an increased sample size, the data provided could have been more conclusive. In addition, an increased sample size can facilitate the identification of trends among the participants who were interviewed.

By increasing the sample size, criteria for participants can also be altered. A sample of participants can be chosen from the public school board, independent school system, and arts-integrated schools respectively in order to gain a more comprehensive view of how teaching practices involving the visual arts and writing differ between the types of schools.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

The findings from this chapter were derived from the experiences and opinions of the three participants. The results of the interviews provided a huge data pool, with both overlapping and unique perspectives. The data collected was consolidated and presented using the following themes:

- Teacher Attitudes Toward Programming for Visual Arts Integration
- Effective Strategies of Visual Arts Integration into Writing
- Student Engagement
- Student Learning
- Barriers for Integration

Teacher Attitudes Toward Programming for Visual Arts Integration

Although not explicitly mentioned in the literature that was reviewed, all three participants cited the importance of the physical and emotional setting of the classroom when integrating the visual arts into the writing curriculum. Participants identified the need for teachers to have a positive attitude towards visual arts integration in order to teach it effectively. They also identified that teachers who held a defeatist attitude when integrating the visual arts impacted the overall classroom climate. Zara illustrated how the lesson itself or the attitude of students can be easily affected by the teacher’s attitude:

Don’t let your hang ups, well anything for that matter, affect your attitude towards teaching young children… If you’re kind of uptight about it or you expect a certain standard, kids will just- they will get uptight too… we need to just be very relaxed and accepting and that will get to the children.
In addition to a positive emotional classroom setting, Sarah and Catherine both highlighted the importance of the physical setting of the classroom when integrating the visual arts into writing lessons. They mentioned that these integrated lessons needed to be purposeful and intentional whether they were planned ahead of time or spontaneously. To ensure that visual arts integration is purposeful, Catherine suggested that we ask ourselves “how the visual arts is going to fit in beautifully with [writing]”. It is not, according to Sarah, “having the children draw and write about the picture and get strong results… the process is much more intentional than that”.

Catherine also highlighted the importance of classroom management to ensure that the visual arts is integrated successfully in the classroom. Simply put, she said that “if you can’t manage your classroom then there’s nothing that’s going to happen because the kids can just run crazy and you’re not going to get any teaching done.”

Catherine also believed that collaboration between teaching staff, the school, parents and the community should be established in the classroom. Catherine said she lives for the opportunity for the grade team to have a meeting once every five weeks, as they “plan together and talk about how [they]’re doing things- what did you do and how did you connect this…” She appreciated “that co-existence with one another, that collaborative effort with one another”.

**Effective Strategies Integrating Visual Arts into Writing**

The three participants discussed a variety of strategies for integrating visual arts into writing, all of which are consolidated into the list below:

- Establish routines for classroom management – plan how the visual arts can be used in a lesson, and what the learning goals are
- Create a supportive classroom culture that celebrates the arts and encourages peer to peer assistance
Purposeful, intentional integration of visual arts into writing that leads to enhancement of lesson and understanding of concept

Have clear expectations with appropriate success criteria that students can review as necessary

Use a variety of materials during the lesson as well as a variety of tools to assess children

Ensure that the visual arts component is student oriented- it is for the student’s own understanding, not how you would like the product to look

Process oriented, not product oriented- learning is the journey itself, and sometimes the journey will lead to a deepened understanding of the curriculum

Don’t be afraid to try it- sometimes the task will seem like it is chaotic, but persistence is the key to success

Student Learning

**Increased Understanding of Concepts.** Participants cited that visual arts integration into writing affected students’ understanding of concepts as it helped students facilitate the steps in the writing process and developed cross curricular connections to concepts in various subject areas. Sarah described that the image making process in art is similar to the writing process:

The thinking that we do when we create an image is very similar to the thinking we do when we write. Decisions are made about setting, character, mood, points of emphasis, etc. It seems especially powerful with children because image making functions as an extra scaffold. They are able to do a lot of the thinking and planning within the image system so that by the time they are required to put words on paper, the "hard" part is done.
Catherine used an anecdote of a storybook-based, arts integrated lesson to illustrate that students could use the visual arts aspect of a lesson to make connections between the writing aspect and the arts:

I’ve taken pictures of clouds and stuff outside and they’ll do cut outs- little cutouts, and they’ll put themselves on the clouds and what they’re doing on the clouds. So it’s like, we’ve read, we’ve done drama, we did some dance, we are doing some artwork and we’re doing some writing.

Catherine and Zara both also found that when they used visual arts integrated lessons in teaching writing, students not only developed an increased understanding in writing and literacy, but also made cross-curricular connections to other subjects based on their writing lesson. The participants mentioned successful first hand experience in connecting integrated visual arts-writing lessons to other areas of the curriculum, and identified the most important point for students to understand is that things “don’t happen in isolation”, and skills acquired in a lesson are transferable in other learning.

**Quality of Work.** Two participants, Catherine and Zara, explained that integrating the visual arts into writing affected students’ quality of work in two ways. First, visual arts integration into writing was used in the pre-writing process to create a jumping off point for students’ writing. Zara discussed how important this pre-writing integration was, as she found that “at this age it’s important for kids to draw. Most kids prefer to draw before they write. It helps them just to get their ideas going.” Catherine agreed on this perspective, as she noticed that integration of visual arts in the pre-writing process “focuse[d] them on the actual area they might be writing about”.

Catherine and Zara also agreed that integrating the visual arts into writing lessons helped students explain their thoughts and ideas in a more detailed way.
Adding a picture just adds a lot to it, especially in grade one, they can’t write. They can show much more through picture plus writing… even though the child that’s writing great as a grade one, I can tell a lot more about their comprehension of the book when I get the picture and the writing together because they’re telling me what they would remember from the book this way as well.

However, it is important to note that participants did not explicitly say that visual arts-writing integration had a positive correlation to quality of work. Cynthia tells us that she “[doesn’t] notice an enormous change in [the quality of work] because [she doesn’t] have a baseline [as she] always ha[s] been doing it this way.”

**Addressing Different Learning Needs in Writing.** For Sarah and Catherine, visual arts integration into writing is preferred to the traditional curriculum because of its ability to accommodate for diverse learners in the classroom. Multiple intelligences are accounted for when integrating the visual arts into writing. Sarah recalled several students in her class that were “very poor writers who are open about hating the entire process. When [she has] worked with them to take them through the image-first approach, they come alive”. Catherine talked about the way in which addressing multiple intelligences have affected students’ work.

It’s made better by the fact that we’re connecting across the curriculum and we’re adding interest, and we’re not just teaching to one learning style. We’re teaching to the child who needs visual, to the kid that’s kinesthetic, the kid who is the auditory learner. So I’m hopeful that there is some kind of difference in terms of what they’re producing.

She also added that for some of her students who couldn’t do the writing aspect of the lesson, visual arts integration gave them a chance to feel that they could do it, and feel like they were doing the same work other kids were doing.
**Struggling Writers.** Catherine, Sarah and Zara have all noted a difference in student learning when utilizing visual arts-writing integration for struggling writers. Sarah and Zara both highlighted that allowing struggling writers to use the visual arts as a tool in writing was a critical part of their writing program and subsequent academic success. Zara illustrated the challenges that struggling writers faced through her observations of a grade one classroom.

At the beginning of the year many of them can’t really write at all when they first come to grade one, it’s totally new for them so I feel that this is really important. If I just gave them a piece of paper and said write a story I think it would be really hard for them. I think that the drawing is actually critical.

Catherine states that in addition to visual arts-writing integration acting as a scaffold to children’s writing, it was also easier for struggling students such as ones in the Home School Program or English as a Second Language program to consolidate their learning in different classrooms through the use of visual arts in writing. However, Zara noted that a reasonable amount of time should be for visual arts in the classroom to avoid an overreliance or too much focus on the visual arts aspect of the lesson. Catherine, on the other hand, encouraged students to spend as much time as they liked on the visual arts aspect of the lesson.

**Authentic Learning.** Catherine described several integrated lessons where students were able to connect the visual arts and writing to authentic learning experiences. The effectiveness of these lessons in teaching students authentically was demonstrated in the following anecdote.

We worked on a literacy pathway around the theme of the rights of the child, and we did so much work around it… We engaged in writing, poetry, letter writing, writing in role… We also talked about how some of the countries that the children from my class came from still lacked those basic rights… some of the kids came to Canada because of those very reasons… We got the chair… they did the most beautiful – the back of the chair had
hands holding one another and they did all the drawings… they wrote words all over it about what they felt was important about the rights of the child like education, freedom, and all the things that meant something to them.

Catherine felt that this lesson was able to connect to the curriculum in many different areas, and was authentic in teaching students about world issues and human rights through an integrated visual arts-writing lesson.

**Student Engagement**

**Art as a Motivator for Writing.** Participants noted that integrating the visual arts into writing acted a motivator for students by increasing students’ fascination towards writing, developing their self-efficacy and adding more incentive to write. Catherine noticed that teaching writing in isolation led to “a half-assed job to be honest… but if I were to teach them about… a style of art... they’re fascinated.” She mentioned a child who “just can’t do it, but when you give her some kind of art form, it’s like wow”.

All participants also commented on visual arts-writing integration giving students a sense of achievement as a result of developing self-efficacy. Sarah described exactly how self-efficacy is developed in visual arts-writing integration and its impact on student’s attitude towards writing.

Art-making is a fun and joyful experience! When you give children [art materials]…they pour themselves into their art-making. That engagement then translates into their writing because the art process has generated so many ideas. At that point the reluctant writers are eager too because they've got all their ideas and it doesn't feel as "hard."

Zara also agreed that this was good practice for every kid because she saw how drawing and writing got them going.
Self-Expression. Catherine noted that integration of visual arts into writing allowed students to be more expressive and explain their thinking. She noted that students were able to use the visual arts to specifically express how they felt, such as when students drew and wrote about “what they felt was important about the rights of the child… and all that meant something to them”. It was also revealed through an anecdote by Catherine that the arts could be very helpful for students who would otherwise lack the confidence to express themselves without the visual arts component in the lesson.

Anyway, with the leopard, it came out the way he wanted to and he must have brought that thing back to me six times, he was SO proud of it. To be able to see that it started off as an idea, that he wrote about this idea, that he researched this idea, that he knew the connection he wanted to make, and he was able to create a piece of art that made him happy, that made him proud of his accomplishment- it’s worth everything.

According to Catherine, the simple task of looking at paintings also “allow[ed] students to pay closer attention to their body language and help them to interpret emotions and feelings, which then can be used in expressive fictional writing later.”

Transferability of Skills. It was noted by the participants that skills acquired through visual arts integration into writing were abundant, and that these skills were often retained and transferred to other tasks. Sarah and Catherine both agreed that the skill that they saw their students develop through visual arts-writing integration is self-efficacy. This was due to the success that students – especially struggling writers – had in writing tasks that involved the integration of visual arts. Catherine noted that this then led to students’ desire to complete future writing tasks. It was quoted that students who were taught using the visual arts-writing integration approach were “able to assess the effectiveness of the decisions they ma[d]e when they’re creating the artwork and appl[ied] the skills to the writing”, and that those who utilized
viewing skills in visual arts led to the development of critical thinking skills, which were transferable to other subjects.

**Barriers for Integration**

All three participants agreed that integrating the visual arts into writing came with many challenges. Sarah, Zara and Catherine all cited time as a factor in delivering integrated visual arts-writing lessons in one way or another. While Zara said time is wasted if students spend too much time drawing, Susan said that too much time is consumed in the early stages of explaining the visual arts aspect to students. On the other hand, Catherine described issues in time due to interruptions and transitions that occurred in the classroom.

Another barrier to successful integration that all three participants discussed is ensuring that the visual arts aspect of a writing lesson is used appropriately and purposefully. Susan first described that not every piece of writing is positively impacted by art, and that for some types of writing, such as non-fiction, it is actually challenging to seamlessly incorporate the visual arts into the writing. Zara focused on the appropriateness of visual arts integration into writing, especially for older children. She recalled grade threes being “so much more sophisticated in their knowledge… and it didn’t seem to be necessary.” Catherine described that her difficulty in using visual arts purposefully is due to a lack of schema or experiences that students could draw from for the visual arts aspect. She said that “the challenge, is trying to… help them use their imagination and their creativity when the whole sphere of what they are able to write about is” so limited.

Finally, some additional barriers that were mentioned by only one or two participants are mentioned in the following list:

- Mess: can be avoided if there is proper planning
• Funding: Materials are expensive, and sometimes a lack of funding might be you are not able to implement such an approach

• Resources: Having staff be supportive of this approach, and to find the appropriate materials for teaching the lesson

• Students’ Perceptions of Visual Art Skills: Zara found drawing was still useful, although the drawings themselves might be more simple, or the drawing time might be shorter

• Fine Motor Difficulties: Zara mentions that although young children tend to struggle with fine motor skills, this is a good opportunity for them to develop these skills
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to determine whether visual arts-writing integration had an effect on student learning and engagement. Its purpose was also to provide educators with first hand information on effective strategies and barriers when integrating the visual arts into writing. Data collected from the interviews were compared to relevant literature, and some correlation was detected. The following discussion is a reflection on the discoveries made about the integration of visual arts into writing, and the implications for educators.

Impact on Engagement

The interviews that were conducted with the participants highlighted the impacts of integrating visual arts into writing to improve student engagement. All three participants agreed that student engagement increased as a result of an increased sense of self-efficacy and the increased interest and initiative that students generated as a result of having visual arts integrated into their lessons. The data gathered from the study correlated with the literature. Olshansky (1994) identified the integration of visual arts as a motivator for students, and Trainin, Andrzejczak & Poldberg (2006) further discussed integrating the visual arts into writing to develop problem solving skills, self-expression skills and their imagination. This was echoed by the first hand data that was collected from the interviews, such as when Catherine discussed the story of a boy who persevered to draw a leopard for his story in order to have the picture reflect the image he had in mind.

In addition, Olshansky (2006) suggested that by integrating the visual arts into writing, students found the writing task easier. This was reflected in Sara’s anecdote, where she found that using visual arts helped students with a lot of the thinking and planning required in writing. Using visual arts as a guide through this “hard” part in writing had an impact on student
engagement as well as their success. The positive impacts of visual arts integration into writing on student engagement were especially noted in students who struggled with writing. Similar to Bussert-Webb (2001) and Carger’s (2004) studies revealing that visual arts-writing integration helped encourage students to make connections and establish a sense of belonging in the classroom, participants noticed that struggling students were more engaged upon the integration of visual arts because it got them going and made the writing process easier to manage. The fact that more than one of the participants recalled moments where visual arts integration hugely impacted the interest, initiative and achievement of children who struggled with writing showed the crucial role that visual arts integration played in student engagement.

**Impact on Learning**

Based on the data collected from the interviews, it seems that there was some evidence to suggest a relationship between visual arts-writing integration and student learning. According to Olshansky’s (2008b) research, using visual arts in writing resulted in better comprehension and writing, and more detailed and complex work. This was suggested in the data provided by the participants, as Zara indicated that students were able to retell or extend upon their writing with the support of pictures that they have drawn. Catherine and Zara also suggested that visual arts integration into writing accounted for students’ multiple intelligences, unlike traditional writing lessons. This aligned with the positive results from Olshansky’s (1994) study, where the integration of visual arts in the process of image making accommodated visual, kinesthetic, and verbal learners, and added more complexity and depth to student work.

The impact of visual arts-writing integration for student learning was most evident in struggling writers, and there is a lot of potential in this approach in teaching writing to struggling writing such as English Language Learners, students with learning disabilities and other students with special needs. Carger’s (2004) study noted that visual arts integration helped children by
bridging linguistic and cultural gaps, and encouraged students to make connections to prior experiences and knowledge, facilitating the transferability of ideas into text. This was validated by Catherine and Sarah, who both mentioned that they saw a change in students’ quality of work as a result of having art as a scaffold for students. Catherine noted that visual arts integration was especially effective for HSP and ESL students, who were able to consolidate some of the information taught in both classrooms using the visual arts, and had academic gains in both writing and in other subjects.

Although not mentioned explicitly in the literature that was reviewed, participants noted some additional benefits of visual arts-writing integration, such as the development of social, cognitive and emotional skills. Specifically, participants noted that students developed a strong sense of self-efficacy as a result of being able to complete a writing task that they might not have been able to complete before. Participants also cited the development of self-expression skills as a result of being able to use pictures and words to create meaning, and noted that students became more aware of their own body language and emotion as a result of looking at and talking about visual arts. Other skills that resulted from visual arts-writing integration included critical thinking skills, working independently, sense of positivity, taking initiative and fine motor skill development. The data collected hints that visual arts-writing integration is even more beneficial than what the literature suggested, and can be much more effective as an approach to teaching writing when compared to traditional methods.

However, more research needs to be conducted to reinforce the data suggesting a strong correlation between visual arts-writing integration and learning. One of the participants indicated that she did not notice a huge change in quality of students’ work in integrated visual arts-writing lessons. However, this might be due to the participant citing that she did not have a benchmark
lesson that was taught using traditional methods to compare to in determining quality of students’ work.

**Implications/Recommendations**

As noted in the effective strategies for visual arts-writing integration and barriers for integration sections, there is a lot for educators to consider before using the visual arts-writing integration approach in their classroom. How these strategies and barriers implicate educators and the classroom is discussed below.

Although the literature and data collected from this study cannot be used to make conclusive statements about the effects of visual arts-writing integration on student learning and engagement, it seems that this approach does not bring with it any ill effects. As a result, educators who are passionate about visual arts integration in their teaching are strongly recommended to integrate visual arts into their writing curriculum. Also, teachers who have attempted to deliver the writing curriculum to their students but have been unsuccessful can attempt to use this approach to engage students and enhance their learning. As discussed in the findings section, teachers need to maintain a positive attitude when utilizing visual arts in their teaching. It is also important for educators to know their students and use various classroom management strategies to ensure students are learning effectively. Integrated lessons need to be purposeful and the visual arts should be used in a process-oriented manner. Educators who utilize this approach should attempt to make as many cross-curricular connections as possible to other subjects in order to make learning as authentic as possible.

The integrated visual arts approach to teaching requires a lot of time, funding and resources. Therefore, the school and the educator need to be prepared to spend time gathering materials and relevant art resources before any integrated lessons are taught. School staff, parents and the community are also encouraged to be involved in the process whenever possible, such as
providing materials or expertise for integrated lessons. In addition, classrooms should be set up in a way that is conducive to learning. Large, empty spaces should be available where children can create art freely, even if there is mess. Large empty spaces are also beneficial for peer-to-peer learning, one of the effective strategies mentioned for integrated visual arts-writing lessons. For a list of additional strategies for educators attempting to integrate visual arts into the writing curriculum, please refer to the ‘Effective Strategies Integrating Visual Arts into Writing’ section in Chapter 4: Findings.

Limitations

The participants interviewed for this study were all based on targeted sampling, and utilized existing connections made by the researcher or in the Master of Teaching program. These participants all had to meet the criteria indicated in the methodology section, and had large amounts of experience integrating the visual arts into writing. They all had a passion towards visual arts integration, and strongly believed in using visual arts-writing integration in their classroom on a frequent basis. As a result, there is a potential for bias in the effects of visual arts-writing integration in student engagement and learning. Had the study included participants that had more neutral views regarding visual arts-writing integration, the validity of the study could have increased.

Although the information gathered from the interviews and literature suggested that visual arts integration should occur more frequently in writing, the sample size of the study was very small, thus limiting the reliability of results. A study that uses a wider sample size will help provide stronger evidence in determining the effects of visual arts-writing integration on student engagement and learning.

Another limitation within the study was that the literature available on visual arts integration mostly discussed drawing as the visual arts aspect of the lesson. There was limited
literature on other forms of visual arts used in writing. In addition, there was a lot of focus on integrating the visual arts only in the pre-writing process to facilitate writing, and limited information on the how the visual arts affects the rest of the writing process. Contrarily, participants frequently mentioned integrating other visual art forms as well as using the visual arts during the rest of the writing process. Therefore, a limited number of generalizations were made that connected the evidence gathered in the literature to the data provided by the participants.

**Further Study**

As the qualitative study conducted did show a correlation between visual arts-writing integration and student learning and achievement, a quantitative study can be designed to support the qualitative data that was collected. A quantitative study can be conducted that involves comparing an experimental group of students who are taught using an integrated visual arts approach to a control group of students who are taught the writing curriculum using ‘traditional’ methods. Measures of student engagement and learning can be designed and used to compare students at the beginning, during, and at the end of the study. This study should show data from an objective perspective in order to increase the reliability of existing data.

The literature and data revealed generalized evidence regarding the effects of visual arts-integration on emotional development and skill development. Even though the participants did suggest that visual arts integration developed skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and self-efficacy, very few concrete examples were given. A further study could be conducted to uncover more information on these topics.

This study only focused on the impact of visual arts integration on writing, but data suggested a positive effect on student engagement and learning. A further study can be conducted on whether visual arts integration impacts student engagement and learning in other
areas of the literacy curriculum or other subjects entirely. This further study can provide insight into whether educators should be taking steps towards visual arts integration in all areas of the curriculum in order to increase student engagement and learning. Specific focus should be put on the impacts of visual arts integration for students that struggle academically, as this study showed that the positive effects of visual arts integration into writing was most evident in students who were struggling writers.

**Conclusion**

As a teacher-researcher, I have had an interest in using arts integration to engage students and to help them learn. After conducting this study, I am even more confident that arts integration can be a successful approach in teaching writing, literacy and other subjects. Using this approach will be especially helpful for students who struggle academically. As an educator, I will strive to create purposeful lessons where art is used often and in an effective way. With this approach, I hope that I am able to reach out to more diverse learners through lessons that address their different learning styles. As a teacher-researcher, I would like to implement arts integrated lessons in my classroom, record them, and interpret the effectiveness of these lessons as future research. Finally, I hope that this study was able to inspire new or struggling teachers by introducing them to a different yet engaging approach in teaching.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Interview Questions

Introduction: Good _________. My name is Michelle Lok, and I am currently a student in the Masters of Teaching program at the University of Toronto. I’d like to first thank you for participating in this interview today. The data collected will contribute to my Masters of Teacher Paper, which is a requirement for completing the Masters of Teaching program. The questions that I will ask today will relate to your general classroom practices, as well as practices involving the use of visual arts in the literacy curriculum. This interview will be recorded, but will be used for the sole purpose of data collection for the research paper. In addition, any personal identifiers will not be included in the research to maintain confidentiality. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes. You have the right to withdraw at any time. Do I have your consent to conduct this interview? (Wait for response)

Do you have any additional questions before we begin? (Wait for response)

Interview Questions:

Background Information

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your background as a teacher? (eg. Grades taught, number of years teaching, schools, how you set up your classroom)

2. Do you have any interests in particular areas of the curriculum? If so, why are you interested in this/these area?

3. What is a typical day in your classroom like?

Experiences in Teaching Literacy
4. Let's focus on the literacy curriculum. Describe what balanced literacy learning in your classroom is like.

5. When teaching literacy with your students, what are some strategies that you believe makes learning effective?

**Visual Arts and Literacy**

6. How would you describe your arts program?

7. How do you think the visual arts plays a role in children’s literacy development?

8. How often and in what ways do you integrate the visual arts when teaching literacy to your students?

b) Do you integrate other types of arts when teaching literacy to your students? (Types of art: visual, dramatic, musical, dance)

**Experiences with Visual Arts and Writing**

10. How comfortable do you feel integrating the visual arts into writing projects in your classroom?

11. How do you decide when to integrate the visual arts into writing?

12. Describe a visual arts project(s) that you did with your students that you integrated into writing.

**Visual Arts and Narrative Writing**

13. How do you think visual arts can be successfully integrated into narrative writing experiences?

14. Tell me a specific story where you were successful at integrating the visual arts into narrative writing.

15. What kind of differences do you notice, if any, in the quality of students’ narrative writing when you choose to integrate visual arts into your teaching?

16. How do you think visual arts activities affects students’ engagement in narrative writing activities?

17. What obstacles do you face when you integrate visual arts into narrative writing, and how do you overcome these?
18. What advice would you give to other teachers who would like to integrate visual arts into narrative writing?

**Conclusion:** Thank you for your time today. Are there other concerns that I need to address at this moment? (Wait for response) If you have any questions or concerns about the interview and need to contact me, you can do so by phone or email.
Appendix B: Letter of Consent for Interview

Dear ________________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the relationship between the visual arts and narrative writing for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Kim MacKinnon. My research supervisor is Larry Swartz. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 45-minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy should you require it.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

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Research Supervisor’s Name: Larry Swartz
Email: larry.swartz@utoronto.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________________ (name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name (printed): __________________________________

Date: __________________