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Art as a Language

Paula Smith

Introduction

My work dealing with art as a language unites my life as an art educator and my experience as the mother of hearing-impaired twin boys. My career as a mother meant devoting ten years to the encouragement of language acquisition. Language acquisition is the fundamental issue for all hearing-impaired children (Paul & Jackson, 1993). Most children acquire language by hearing it spoken. When hearing is impaired, language development is either not possible, or is delayed, depending on the extent of the hearing loss. Then, intervention, sometimes extensive, is required to facilitate the language development needed for intellectual growth. Language, in reference to hearing-impaired children, usually means English in this culture, and/or sign language.

There are two approaches to educating the hearing-impaired. Total Communication (TC) uses both sign language and lip reading. TC students sign and speak simultaneously. Oral education concentrates on using residual hearing, lip reading, cued speech, and speech therapy. The small private schools that use the oral method of education for the hearing-impaired have experienced an increased enrollment because of cochlea implants. These surgically inserted devices allow children who are totally deaf to receive auditory input so they can become part of the hearing world.

I believe that art is a visual language which can provide an alternate avenue of learning for this population. The purpose of this study is to describe the state of art education in the OPTION schools and to explore the extent to which art is being used as a language. If anyone is using art as a language, it seems to be likely to be this group of educators who have a great need for additional methods of communication and the resources to develop those methods.

The Literature Review

To consider art a visual language, the definition of language must be explored and broadened. Lahey, a verbal language expert, defines language as a code, a means of representation, (Lahey, 1988). Verbal language is often compared to visual language by art critics. Feldman (1981) cites similarities between visual and verbal languages, by referring to the combination of visual elements as syntax. Cromer (1966) in comparing the two languages cites common basic elements. The formal and figurative

elements of art equal basic morphemes, complex structures equal syntax, and the meaning of art is its semantics.

Of course, artists view the visual language as superior. Kepes (1944) describes visual language as more holistic than spoken language, more efficient as a means of communicating knowledge than most other means of communication. Arnheim (1969) considers the visual language superior because it comes closer to the original stimulus than verbal language which is linear and one dimensional, by comparison. As an art critic, Feldman reads the visual language. Comparing the two languages, he says that reading the visual image has more sequential options than reading words. A picture can be read starting from many different points of view, and read from more than one point of view at a time, (Feldman 1976). A proponent of art criticism for even the youngest children, Feldman says we learn visual language, without formal instruction, earlier and more spontaneously than verbal language and that children with modest verbal reading ability can read complex visual images, yet are often presented with only simple, childish ones -- "visual pabulum" (Feldman, 1981. p. 657).

Very few researchers have applied the idea of art as a visual language to teaching children whose language skills are weak. Teaching cognitive concepts using art has been explored by Rawley Silver (1978,1979), who used art to teach the concepts of class, space, and sequential order to intercity hearing-impaired students, ages' 8-17. Silver's extensive work was followed by a study involving young hearing-impaired children who were successfully taught basic concepts through art activities (Greene, 1981). Greene's study involved a different population, kindergarten and first graders in a southern school for the deaf. Classroom teachers taught Greene's experimental, highly visual, curriculum. Scores from the art based phases of the curriculum were consistently higher than the control phases. Every student benefited from the art-based instruction.

In a more general way, James & James (1980) explored the value of art to hearing impaired students. Because art is an area in which visual, not verbal communication is of primary importance, hearing-impaired students can quickly comprehend the visual formation required for success in this area. Art provides an opportunity for language learning because students are actively involved in the experiences around which language is generated and because the language can be related to concrete objects, processes, and events (James & James, 1980). Nothing more about art and the hearing-impaired has been published in the literature of either art education or deaf education in the last decade. No theories connect art and language development. If that connection exists in the practical world of everyday teaching, it seems most likely to be in the OPTION schools.

Method

To establish contact with the OPTION schools, a survey, consisting of three brief questions and one open-ended question, was mailed to all OPTION members. The survey asked whether or not the school had an art teacher, how much time per week students spent with the art teacher, and how frequently students draw or participate in art activities in the classroom. All of these questions could be answered by circling a possible response. The open-ended question asked how students benefit from drawing and other art activities. The survey requested the name of the art teacher or a classroom teacher, who could serve as an informed observer. The response rate was 81%. Nineteen of the twenty-one returned surveys were completed, generating a list of twelve people, (nine art teachers, two administrators and one non-art teacher), to be interviewed by telephone. The loosely structured interviews lasted from thirteen to forty-five minutes. The data were recorded as field notes on the interview guide. These field notes were then transcribed to form a description of each art program in the first person, retaining a sense of the teacher's voice.

Analysis began after the first three interviews. Goals emerged as a category and the question of process versus product as a program goal was added to the interview guide. Several respondents identified their programs as "integrated" so the issue of integration of art into the curriculum was added. The development of graphs provided a visual picture that helped make connections between data.

Results

The data present a picture of art in the OPTION schools. This includes the educational preparation of the people who teach art, the variety of art media taught, the amount of art instruction students receive, whether or not art is integrated into the curriculum, the goals of art instruction, the inclusion of art history and art criticism, and how art is assessed.

Teacher Preparation

The survey reported nine of eighteen schools, or 50%, have a designated art teacher. That compares favorably with the national average of 25% (Hodsell 1988). The educational preparation of these art teachers varied widely from one teacher who holds a masters degree in art education plus many years of additional course work in studio art, to teachers who studied other areas of art such as art history, medical illustration, or interior design. The teachers with the strongest backgrounds in art education were more focused on art-related goals than on linguistic goals.

Three respondents who had no formal training in art education spoke at length and with great enthusiasm about their obviously well developed programs. Two of these teachers had studied art history; they had only to invent methods for teaching a subject they love and understand. Still, three people out of twelve are poking around under unfamiliar rocks for curriculum. What motivates such a search into foreign territory? I believe that we all teach best what we believe to be most important. Language learning is so vital for hearing-impaired students and these teachers had based their programs on linguistic goals. Art is a powerful learning tool for meeting linguistic goals.

Variety of Media

The number of different media explored varied from five different media in one program to a program that included all eleven media listed on the interview guide: drawing, painting, printmaking, weaving, sculpture, ceramics, book arts, jewelry, photography, installation art, and film making.

Instruction Time

The average is 59 minutes per week. The National Art Education Association (NAEA) basic standard recommendation is 100 minutes per week of art instruction for elementary students; no specific amount of instruction is indicated for middle or high school students (NAEA 1982). This standard is a recommendation and not the actual amount of art instruction received by students.

Art instruction in the OPTION schools ranges from 30 minutes to 150 minutes per week. In most cases, students at all levels receive the same amount of art instruction. When the amount of art instruction varies within a school, the younger students, the ones with less well developed verbal language, receive more art instruction time in all cases except one. Do the younger students with weaker linguistic skills receive more art instruction because art augments and supports their language learning? That conclusion cannot be drawn from this data.

Integration of Art into the Curriculum

If art is being used as a language, it is likely to be used in all areas of study. All 19 of the surveys reported that students participated in art activities in the classroom. Interview respondents described 7 of the 12 programs as integrated. Three of those programs have art teachers who saw students separately for instruction in addition to classroom art experiences. One of those art teachers works closely with classroom teachers to design activities that are carried out in the classroom, like grid drawings used to illustrate math principles. This practice is consistent with NAEA basic standards recommending that classroom art activities be conducted with the guidance of an art specialist (NAEA 1986).

Some of the integrated programs, operating without qualified specialists, seemed to genuinely value art and make art an integral part of the curriculum. In one of those programs, the administrator specifically assesses whether or not the arts are included in classroom curriculum. In these comparatively small institutions, perhaps valuing art is not always expressed by hiring a qualified specialist to teach it, but rather by integrating meaningful art activities into the curriculum.

Five art programs described in the interviews seemed to be separate from the rest of the curriculum. One teacher said,"I don't go into the classrooms and don't know what goes on in there." Another observed that though teachers did art in their classes, it was mostly "craftsy stuff." The classroom teachers in those five schools may be integrating art into the curriculum but their voices are not heard.

Goals for Art Instruction

Art is not being taught just for art's sake in these settings. Linguistic goals are much more significant as the driving force behind art instruction here. While art-related goals are important, they are not central to the primary mission of these institutions, which is language development.

When asked "How do you think your students benefit from art activities?", fifteen of the eighteen survey respondents listed two or more goals. Fourteen of the survey respondents referred to communication or self-expression. The great majority of goals, stated in both the surveys and the interviews, were concerned with overall student development, rather than art skills. The most frequently mentioned goal was self-expression (cited 13 times), followed by other linguistic goals (mentioned 12 times). Within the category of linguistic goals, art is used to elicit language, to motivate good speech, and to develop vocabulary. For example, when students drew eyes on their life-size Egyptian figures by making a dot, the art teacher taught them to draw all the parts of the eye. This created a list of new vocabulary to be reinforced by the classroom teacher.

Other goals include creativity and risk taking (cited 8 times), self-esteem (cited 6 times), and fine-motor skills, including eye-hand coordination (cited 6 times) The 8 art goals mentioned included doing art right, mastery of different media, developing a sense of design, learning the basic elements of art, exploration and mastery of elements, art appreciation and awareness. Eleven other goals were mentioned including emotional release, being well-rounded, perceptual awareness, and fun.

Art History and Art Criticism

Teaching art history and art criticism seems to be a function of the teacher's interests and orientation, with no connections to other data. Art criticism was included in 10 of the 12 programs. Seventy-five per cent of the programs included some art history. Two especially well-developed programs were based on art history. One teacher begins the year on a football field marking the time of the dinosaurs, cave man, and all the periods of art she will introduce. Students at all levels progress through the history of art during the year. They begin with cave paintings, using crushed chalk on the walls of an interior bathroom, lit by flashlight. This is followed by a study of Egyptian art in which students created life-size figures that are used in a haunted house/tomb for Halloween. Greek, Roman, gothic, and renaissance, baroque, impressionism, pointillism, art nouveau, action painting and photography follow Egyptian art

Five programs offered art history on a very limited basis. One teacher did not teach art history but had developed studio projects based on the work of artists such as Gustov Klimpt. Three programs had no art history. Three teachers cite a lack of resources as the reason for not teaching art history. One teacher said, in reference to art history, that she does not "have time for lectures." Another felt that art history required a time-consuming move into a different building. In all, four teachers said they did not teach art history because of time limitations.

I was careful to define art criticism simply as talk about art. If art is a means of self-expression, it follows that the art work would provide an opportunity to elicit language by attaching words to the student's visually expressed observations and ideas. Therefore, I had expected that all the art programs would include an opportunity for guided discussion of student work and perhaps their works of art as well. Art criticism takes place in 10 of the 12 programs to some extent. Three teachers have well-developed approaches to art criticism including the following: discussing process and product while talking about book illustrations as part of whole language, comparing works of art and pointing out differences and similarities. In one program the students talk about their own work by discussing: (1) something they are proud of, (2) something they would change, and (3) something about their work that was fun. The two respondents who reported no art criticism were both art teachers who said they did not think their students would approve of using their art time for history and criticism.

Assessment

Four teachers assessed student progress by sending home individualized reports, always positive. Three of them cited fine motor skills, self-esteem, and creativity, as the basis for assessing student work. Three

programs are monitored by administration. One administrator of an integrated program stated that she gives feedback to the teachers about art ideas and expects them to include the arts in their planning. Two respondents reported that assessment was informal. Three respondents reported no assessment of student work.

Conclusions

Though no attempt was made to assess individual programs, viewing data across programs led to insights about how program characteristics relate. Experience with a wide variety of art media, integration of art into the curriculum, and well-defined, primarily linguistic, goals were associated. The program offering all 11 types of art media is also an integrated program and one with clearly defined goals. Three other programs, offering as many as 8 different types of art media, are also integrated and have well-defined goals. Programs offering 7 or fewer different kinds of art media have not integrated art into the curriculum and have less well defined goals.

This study reveals a great range in the value placed on art experiences as expressed in the connections drawn between art and other areas of the curriculum, the amount of art instruction provided, the nature of the art curriculum goals for teaching art, and how those are assessed. Art is a valued part of the curriculum in most of the OPTION schools. The emphasis placed on communication goals points to the use of art as a language. A look at the best of what happens in these programs reveals many ways in which art is used as a language.

The study does not include as a distinct entity, the voice of the administrators. The children are not heard either, except as reported by the teachers. The parents are a vital part of their children's education and need to be heard also. To paint a clear picture of how the visual language is used in these programs, I would have to visit the schools, talk to administrators, classroom teachers, parents, and students.

This study has implications that go beyond the education of the hearing impaired. It has implications for students with specific language impairments and for children to whom English is a second language. Art reduces the problem of communication to one of translation. An idea is translated from the original thought into visual language. Verbal symbols, words, can then be meaningfully mapped onto the visual symbols. The visual referent acts as a bridge between the thought and the abstract verbal symbol with which it is associated. The result is communication.

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