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WHOLE SCHOOL REFORM & THE A+ SCHOOLS PROGRAM

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This paper explores the structure and philosophy of the A+ Schools Program of arts based whole school reform that originated in the state of North Carolina, USA in 1995. Through examining the A+ Essentials, or elements, that are critical to the program and the research that supports their inclusion, this paper argues that A+ Schools successfully improve the quality of education.

Key words: whole school reform, arts integration, interdisciplinary curriculum, A+ Schools.

Research has shown that integrating the arts into the curriculum is an effective way to improve the quality of education (Fiske, 2000). The A+ Schools Program, which originated in 25 North Carolina schools in 1995, is an example of successful arts-based whole school reform. Outside evaluators and independent researchers have identified positive results of the A+ Program that are in alignment with current research on the beneficial effects of the arts in education. This paper will offer an overview of the A+ Program, describe the A+ Essentials, or elements, that are critical to the program and the research that supports their approach to school reform.

The A+ Program defines itself as a comprehensive school reform that views the arts as fundamental to how teachers teach and how students learn in all subjects (Nelson, 2001). The program focuses on eight intended areas of emphasis that must be addressed for successful reform to occur. These are termed, A+ Essentials: A Set of Commitments, and are the core of on-going professional development experiences for faculty and staff that are implemented over a three-year period.

The A+ Essentials include a focus on: arts, curriculum, Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory, enriched assessment, experiential learning, collaboration, climate, and infrastructure. The A+ Program places the responsibility and ownership of reform on the schools. Reform is considered an on-

going process engaged in uniquely by each school through a set of commitments, instead of a uniform product that results from a packaged equation.

The A+ Program whole school reform model requires at least a three-year commitment by schools and districts to create lasting change. The dissemination of the program takes place in phases. Each year A+ personnel, or “A+ Fellows,” lead an intensive Summer Institute for teachers and staff from each school. A few months prior to the first summer institute, faculty and staff participate in two day-long pre-institutes that are designed to introduce the A+ Program to the school and the school to the A+ staff. During the first year of adoption, the Summer Institute lasts five days, the following two years, it lasts three days. The A+ Program provides follow-up sessions each semester that offer additional instruction, and individual consultation with teacher teams and A+ Fellows. During the professional development interventions teachers, staff, and administrators engage in activities that promote the A+ Essentials, allowing teachers to experience first-hand strategies they will implement in their classrooms.

A+ Essentials

Most of the A+ Essentials involve curriculum reform. In this article the use of the term “curriculum” refers to teaching content, methods, strategies, and resources. The A+ Program promotes change in each of the four areas of curriculum through its A+ Essentials.

Arts

The most distinguishing Essential of the A+ Program is the emphasis on the arts-based learning. Because public schools are required to teach state mandated content & skills, the A+ Program seeks to support teachers in meeting state expectations for achievement, not altering the content or expectations. In an A+ School, the arts (music, dance, drama, visual arts, and creative writing) are heightened in the academic programmatic design. Students are exposed to increased arts instruction in the skills, concepts, elements, and techniques of the various art forms.

Third space: When learning matters, describes a comprehensive study of high poverty schools that identified the arts as the primary reason for the success of their whole school reform efforts (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005). An A+ School was among the ten schools included in the study. The authors placed their findings in the context of previous research, including *Champions of change: The role of arts in learning*, a compilation seven studies supported by private foundations in alignment with the President’s Committee on Arts and Humanities in 2000. *Champions of change* explains that the arts have the capacity to, “...reach students who otherwise were not fully engaged by other schools subjects and experiences” (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005, p. xiii). Their findings support assertions that participation in the arts levels the playing field for all students.

Arts Integration

Because of the success of the arts in reaching and motivating students, the A+ Program promotes what is called, “two-way arts integration.” This involves integrating the arts’ content and skills into academic subjects (math, science, language arts, and social studies) and academic content and skills into arts instruction to create more meaningful experiences in both arenas

An example of two-way arts integration would be to introduce cubist painting into the classroom for students to analyze the use of line and shape, elements of both visual art and geometry. Greater attention to visual arts elements deepens the understanding of the geometric principles and vice versa.

Major national research studies have described the positive effects of arts education and arts integration on students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and students who otherwise experience learning difficulty (Deasy, 2002). This result is especially relevant for the A+ schools because they serve a population that is representative of the state, which includes a higher percentage of economically disadvantaged youth than other schools. The four-year evaluation of A+ Schools found that teachers identified no significant difference of program outcomes among the different groups of students. Teachers in the A+ Program identified increased access to curriculum by more students as a result of the program (Nelson, 2001).

Third space: When learning matters explains that, “the arts put students in active and meaningful roles in their classrooms and connected schools to student’s lives and cultures ...” (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005, p.17). Evaluators of the A+ Program claimed that after implementation of the A+ program there were gains in student attendance. Principals unanimously cited student enthusiasm about classroom learning experiences as the reason behind attendance increases. In student surveys, according to the evaluators, students expressed a desire not to “miss out” on arts activities (Nelson, 2001). The ability of the arts to engage students and make academic content meaningful to student’s lives impacts several other A+ strategies for school reform, including tapping multiple learning styles through hands-on classroom experiences.

Multiple Intelligences theory & experiential learning

The most influential learning theories today support the teaching of content and skills in a variety of ways that may address different learning styles. Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences theory redefines the traditional view of intelligence that favors verbal and mathematical competence. He asserts that there are many other categories of “intelligence,” (he synthesized them into eight) including kinesthetic, musical, and spatial (Gardner, 1993), through which people access and demonstrate knowledge and understanding. If instruction caters to only those students who best learn and demonstrate their knowledge through verbal and mathematical means, the children who learn more readily through other avenues are disadvantaged. An A+ Essential is to address Multiple Intelligences. A+

teachers teach a certain topic through multiple instructional and assessment strategies that may reach these diverse learners.

By their very nature, arts activities are hands-on and engage a variety of intelligences including: bodily/kinesthetic through dance and drama); verbal/linguistic through drama and creative writing; visual/spatial and logical/mathematical through art and dance; musical/rhythmic through music and dance; interpersonal through dance, drama, and music; and intrapersonal through creative writing. Champions of Change asserts that, "If arts learning can help energize or re-energize the teaching workforce, ... then we must look to the arts both as a vehicle for preparing entrants to the teaching profession and as a means of supporting its more-experienced members" (Fiske, 2000, p. xi). The A+ Program's modeling of arts integrated instruction inspires teachers and provides them with a guideline for addressing multiple intelligences and creating hands-on learning opportunities for students.

Interdisciplinary curriculum & enriched assessment

The process of creating two-way arts integrated lessons exercises one's ability to make connections across the curriculum. Taking an integrated, thematic approach to curriculum is another A+ strategy and Essential that affects the content and methods of instruction, and forms of assessment.

During the A+ Summer Institute teachers meet in grade level teams to examine the state mandated curriculum and "map" connections among core subject and arts area content and skills within and across grade levels over the course of the year. Through curriculum mapping interdisciplinary connections are revealed, laying the groundwork for arts integrated lessons and collaborative teaching and learning. The connections are formalized into thematic units through which lens core content and arts curriculum are explored. Within the framework of a thematic unit teachers can identify together meaningful authentic forms of assessment for student understanding, another A+ Essential. More often these enriched assessments are arts-based culminations of the interdisciplinary unit that engage multiple intelligences.

A physical representation of the curriculum map is displayed in the faculty lounge or staff room to invite revisions and continued exploration of connections. The process of curriculum mapping is ongoing throughout the year. The effectiveness of the interdisciplinary thematic units to meet the intended goals is assessed by the teachers during the next A+ Summer Institute and units are revised for the following year.

The interdisciplinary approach presents academic content and skills to students in a way that is relevant and meaningful to their lives. This approach enhances student understanding and application of required content and skills. The four-year evaluation of A+ Schools cites that all schools met state expectations for achievement, and made equivalent improvements to other state schools without

sacrificing a balanced curriculum that includes arts, physical education, and social studies. The evaluation cites areas of improvement including attendance, student enthusiasm for learning, teacher morale and community engagement that are not measured by standardized tests. According to the Executive Summary of the four-year evaluation of A+ Schools (Nelson, 2001), teachers identified changes in how they work with each other and in the quality of the collaborative work. While teachers' morale was improved through the collaborative element of the A+ Program, so, too, were the schools' connections to their community.

Collaboration

Another organizational strategy implemented by the A+ Program's whole school reform involves strengthening the school's partnerships. This includes partnering with parents, community organizations and arts organizations. Third space: When learning matters (Stevenson & Deasy, 2005) identifies crucial elements to successful school reform that are present in A+ Schools:

The power of a vision to transform a school lies in whether it truly engages those in the school and in the community in ways they find meaningful and rewarding. Ultimately, the vision must grow out of and perpetuate a sense of shared purpose and community (p.13).

The A+ Essentials articulate the need for the arts to be part of the "whole school's identity," and for the infrastructure of the school to create a shared vision. Collaboration among teachers, students, families, and the local community is an A+ Essential. Each party is considered a resource for students. The evaluation of the A+ Program schools identified an increased channel of communication within schools and between schools and the community, and a sense that the arts were legitimized (Nelson, 8). New partnerships developed in each of the schools, as parental involvement increased.

The A+ Program is becoming recognized nationally as a successful and meaningful approach to whole school reform. In its twelfth year, the A+ Program has been adopted by schools in four states and is continuing to expand through the establishment of the National A+ Schools Consortium in 2003. The continued growth of the A+ Schools Program is an indication of the potential it has to impact significant change across our educational landscape.

The success of the A+ Program's approach to whole school reform can be attributed to several factors. The emphasis on arts inclusion and two-way integration engages students and creates meaningful learning experiences that address multiple learning styles. The A+ attention to collaboration and interdisciplinary curriculum mapping provides teachers and students with a holistic approach to curricular content as intimately connected to real life. Collaboration between teachers inspires exploration of community and parental partnerships and involvement. The positive effects of the A+ Program have led to institutional change including increased program funding at the state level, more arts

instruction, formalized team planning time in the daily schedule, and additional schools pursuing the A+ approach. This paper sought to describe the structure and philosophy of the A+ Schools Program and identify the current research that supports this innovative approach to whole school reform.

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ХОЛІСТИЧНА РЕФОРМА ШКОЛИ І ПРОГРАМА “ШКОЛИ ВІДМІННИКІВ”

Аллісон Дауни

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Розглянуто структуру і філософію педагогічної реформи “Школа відмінників”, що спрямована на залучення школярів до успішної мистецької діяльності. Її розпочав 2005 року штат Південної Кароліни. На підставі філософських ідей та ключових елементів цієї програми проаналізовано, що реформа під назвою “Школа відмінників” може сприяти значному поліпшенню якості навчання.

Ключові слова: холістична реформа школи, інтеграція мистецтв, інтердисциплінарний курікулум, “Школа відмінників”.

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