

# **The Art of Reading: A Look at Student Motivation, Self-Esteem, and Self-Perception When the Arts are Integrated with Reading Curriculum**

By Meg Burns

## **SCHOOL CONTEXT**

My school is located in an isolated, low-income industrial area of Chicago. This urban neighborhood has always served as a traditional haven for hopeful immigrant families, although the countries of origin have changed over the years. The current population is 95% Latino, with a 94% poverty rate. Each grade level at my school accommodates the constant influx of new immigrant families with a full bilingual class. Although not essential, it is extremely helpful for teachers to be fluent in Spanish, as most of the parents are not native English speakers. Teachers here describe their students as “sweet” and “darling.” Even the most difficult behavioral challenges present little disturbance in the peaceful classroom environment.

The main building is one of the oldest in the city of Chicago, last annexed in 1911 to accommodate overcrowding. It houses 795, which makes us approximately 150% overcrowded with our 1,320 students. Overflow is accommodated in a series of temporary mobile units and rented space in two Catholic schools. Our fifth grade’s temporary arrangement has lodged us in the upper floor of a still-operational high school in six rented rooms.

The administration in our school is extremely supportive and allows for considerable latitude in instructional design. Best practices and adhering to the standards are encouraged as well as professional development and sharing. Admittedly, our

teaching conditions at the high school are not optimal, but concerns are addressed with authentic interest and prompt action from our leadership.

The fifth grade classrooms at the high school extension are small and designed for about 20 stationary high school desks. Each room now houses at least 30 elementary desks and chairs, as well as the abundant accoutrements necessary for elementary curriculum. It's a tight fit. I constantly remind my students of the importance of "loving each other" because from September until June is a long time to be packed in with people you choose to dislike.

Shelving and storage units line the walls with Learning Centers placed at various positions throughout the room. Most materials are mobile, since there is little room for the students to park at a "station" and explore an activity. There is a cozy interactive reading corner with pillows, party lights, a reading graffiti board, and hundreds of reading reflections taped to the wall. Because we lack bulletin boards, student work is suspended from twine strung across the room and also clipped to long strings hanging on the window shades. One visitor once informed me that my room looks like a learning "menagerie." I like that comparison, and it is an apt description of my own visual-learning bias.

The students in 302 are active, chatty, and eager to please. They love exciting new learning opportunities, but lack the maturity and experience at times to contain their enthusiasm. Many of the concepts such as centers, cooperative group learning, and self-directed independent activities are newer to the school and, therefore, require some getting used to by the students. Most students have adjusted, and the classroom is transitioning nicely into a "student-centered" environment.

## **RATIONALE**

Approaching the question of how to teach reading effectively to second language learners required that I confront who I am. I entered teaching from a professional arts background. After three years in the teaching field, I had to ask myself, “Why am I doing this?” To be true to myself as a professional teacher, I had to acknowledge my background as an artist’s daughter and my 18-plus years as a professional actor.

Perhaps these were valuable and worthwhile tools that might hold the key to success in my classroom. How might I use my previous experience to my advantage? Although most students are taught to comprehend text, it is difficult to fully understand anything written without making a personal connection, reflecting on an image associated with the words, or imagining what the scene or characters might look or act like.

We have become a predominantly visual society. Outside of school, children are exposed to computers, video games, movies, television, and other visual stimuli on a daily basis. To ignore this influence on cognitive development would presume that children develop and learn in a vacuum.

The NCLB mandate has put many teachers and administrators in the precarious position of having to make difficult choices about curriculum. Many times, the “more is more” approach is used to increase deficiencies in math and reading. Many schools, including mine, have expanded reading blocks from one to two hours in hopes of an increase in standardized test scores. My research question evolves from my experience that “more” instruction devoted to a discipline does not necessarily mean that mastery will occur. “More” instruction in reading will not make a child, who may require an alternative process, achieve success in reading. So I asked, if one couples standard

instruction with meaningful engagement in the arts, will that child, who is otherwise unreachable by traditional means, make vital connections to literature?

## **BACKGROUND**

When examining the role of the arts in education, it's important to consider the broader context of the process of learning. Historically, education theory has supported the idea that individuals acquire, digest, and demonstrate knowledge through varying means. A widely accepted theory that accounts for the many variables in human development is Gardner's (2006) "multiple intelligences" theory. Gardner's research decries homogeneous educational programs that appeal only to surface knowledge of facts. He proposes an educational environment that fosters the growth and development of an individuals' multiple intelligences that cannot function in isolation. These intelligences include Linguistic, Logical-mathematical, Musical, Bodily-kinesthetic, Interpersonal and Intrapersonal, Spatial, and Naturalist. According to Gardner, individuals embody either "laser" or "searchlight" intelligence profiles (p. 36). The former indicates a sharp spike in an individual's profile that indicates strength in one or two intelligences and the latter suggests equivalent strengths in three or more spheres.

Traditional education, which focuses on reading and math, presumes Linguistic and Logical-mathematical as the central modes of learning. This is what standard instruction and high-stakes testing, the primary components of NCLB, are based on. Eisner (2002) asserts that art is critical in cultivating a full life experience. He promotes the idea of using art education to foster academic performance. He cites evidence of

increased SAT, ACT, and other standardized test scores among students in schools that integrate arts into the curriculum.

If the arts do indeed appeal to various modes of learning, then is it possible for that learning to transfer to other disciplines? Yes, according to Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000). In a six-year longitudinal study of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE), Catterall & Waldorf (1999) compared 26 CAPE schools with 26 control schools with similar demographics. There was a nearly 20% rise in reading scores among sixth grade students in the CAPE schools, compared to a less than 10% rise in the control schools. Similar increases were exhibited in math as well. On this basis, Catterall (2002) claims that the arts “unequivocally impact future learning experiences” (p. 152). He explains that the arts provide unique neurological patterning in the brain which creates adaptability in the individual when it comes to proficiency in “core” subjects such as reading and math.

Why are the arts important to mainstream education? Fiske (1999) holds that there is compelling evidence of the benefits of a learning environment that is blended with exemplary academics and high quality arts instruction:

- \* The arts reach students not otherwise being reached.
- \* The arts connect students to themselves and each other.
- \* The arts transform the environment for learning.
- \* The arts provide learning opportunities for the adults in the lives of young people.
- \* The arts provide new challenges for those students already considered successful.

The primary casualty of NCLB is the arts. Arts programs, staff, and resources have been shoved aside in underperforming schools in favor of enhancing test performance in reading and math.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

What happens to student motivation, self-esteem, and self-perception when visual art and dramatic arts are integrated with reading curriculum?

### **Sub Questions**

- \* How do students connect literature to their personal experiences when the arts are integrated into reading?
- \* How does arts integration affect classroom behavior?
- \* How do students manifest their self-esteem through participation in integrated art activities and literature study?
- \* What do student insights reveal about their own self-perception through integrated art activities and literature study?
- \* What happens to reading standardized test scores when art is integrated into reading curriculum?
- \* What are the surprises for the teacher?

## UNIT OUTLINE

The unit revolved around the novel *Searching for David's Heart*, a story about a 12 year-old girl, Darcy, whose brother is tragically killed when hit by a car. The girl believes that her brother's death is her fault because she harbored a deep resentment and jealousy over her brother's relationship with his new girlfriend. When he dies, his organs are donated, and Darcy and her best friend, Sam, run away from home to find the recipient of David's transplanted heart.

I felt strongly that this emotional story would provide ample opportunity for personal connections and student interpretation and discussion. The topic of an untimely death, the disintegration of a family through grief, the courage of a young girl and her desperate determination to connect to her lost brother, all appeared to present exceptional opportunities for the integrated arts activities I had intended for the unit.

I used the model of a literature circle that includes discussion, guided reading, written response, and vocabulary study—elements accepted as standard practice in reading instruction and addressing two of Gardner's (2006) Intelligences: Linguistic and Interpersonal.

I arranged to have a visiting artist come to work with the children on an art and writing project in which they would create postcards with three-dimensional objects and write a letter as a character from the book. Additionally, the students were to write and perform two plays, one in the beginning of the novel study and one at the end. These projects addressed learning styles often neglected by standard reading instruction: Spatial, Bodily-kinesthetic, and Intrapersonal.

## **DATA TOOLS**

I collected data from three primary sources: student work samples, student surveys, and teacher observation notes. Student work was vital to assessing the impact of the visual and dramatic arts on their reading. From student surveys, I wanted to assess student opinions of their reading abilities throughout the unit as well as their responses to the integrated unit. Teacher observation notes were critical to examining the overall trends in student responses, skills, and behaviors related to the strategies being implemented.

A fourth source, standardized test data, emerged as a tool that provided some quantitative information on class progress. Although I did not originally anticipate that this test data would be a mode of measurement, I decided to add it as an opportunity for an additional perspective on the progress of my students.

## **PRESENTATION**

Before I started this unit, a notable issue arose involving a young girl, Talia, and a tragic life experience that made me question my choice of material for this project. A second issue arose when it became apparent that two of my students, Alfonse and Juan, were responding to this unit in a manner that was noteworthy.



I have chosen to present my findings in a way that allows me to incorporate the journeys of these three students as well as reflect on my class' response to this unit and its progress.

In so doing, each data source will be offered independently, followed by a discussion of that data and the specific responses of my case-study students. Teacher observation journals will be incorporated throughout.

### Talia's Connection

On Monday, a week before we began our study, I arrived at work about 45 minutes early to find Talia waiting in the cold. She had been standing outside the school's locked door since 7:00 am. Wondering why my favorite classroom helper had arrived so early, I asked how her weekend went and if she was all right. As it happened, Talia's grandmother, who had stepped in as "mother" when Talia's birthmother died from drugs and alcohol and Talia's father went to prison, died on Friday. Talia was left with two brothers, a grandfather, and a step-grandmother. We said very little. When the other students arrived, she asked to go see our school clerk, the "mother hen" of our satellite location, and sat under her desk in the school office for the remainder of the day.

Talia arrived early every day after, eventually emerging from her safe haven under the clerk's desk and rejoining the class. She asked that I keep her heartbreak in confidence, which I honored. During that time, I was conflicted about my choice in literature. Was it truly fair to this little girl to bring up something so tragic and so recent? Would it be rubbing salt in a wound as we studied the journey of grief and anguish through the book's characters? However, something kept steering me back to my initial

choice, and I decided to stay with *Searching for David's Heart*. It turned out to be the portal to an unexpected journey for Talia and me. The story, characters, and emotions implicit in the novel appeared to offer the construct for grief that Talia craved. Through the course of our reading and integrated art activities, Talia seemed to connect with the grieving sister and found ways to connect her own personal journey with each activity.

### Behavior Issues

Alfonse and Juan presented chronic behavioral challenges that, at times, compromised the quality of instruction for themselves and other students. Their records indicated excessive detentions, suspensions, and low grades. My experience with them mirrored their records, and reading time seemed to provide them with a forum for unacceptable behavior, particularly in less structured activities.

I was concerned that their behavior might disrupt our integrated unit. Because of the sensitive nature of this novel, I was also concerned that the material might not be handled respectfully, and unruly behavior and inappropriate comments might squelch discussion. However, over the course of the unit, Alfonse and Juan unexpectedly connected to the theatrical and artistic portions of our literature study.

I did not set out to examine behavior as part of my study. However, as our class became immersed in the project, I started to notice that the personality of my room began to shift. One primary indicator that stood out was the absence of traditional behavior “distractions,” particularly during the drama and visual art activities.

### **DATA**

## Student work samples

I have preserved misspellings and punctuation mistakes in all student work to maintain the sincerity of their voices. Pseudonyms and identifying initials were assigned to student participants to ensure privacy.

### Student “mini plays” — Performance 1

#### Description of activity:

After literature circle discussions, groups chose two characters and wrote a dialogue for them to perform in front of the class. Since this was their first endeavor into theatrical writing, students were instructed to write 10 lines of dialogue and choose two members to perform it.

Five of the six groups chose to write a dialogue between Darcy and her brother David, after he had passed away. One group chose to write a dialogue between Darcy and her best friend, Sam, who accompanied her on her trip to find David’s heart.

All groups wrote about forgiveness. Although all of the plays were very short, the children’s instinct to connect with these characters on such a profound level was apparent.

#### Script Excerpt — Darcy and Sam

##### Magenta Group

**Darcy:** Sam, I am so glad you took me here!

**Sam:** It’s not problem Dee Dee. Are you still mad at me?

**Darcy:** No, I'm not. Bur can you please forgive me?

Script Excerpts — David and Darcy

Emerald Group

**Darcy:** I am sorry I screamed at you and threw the necklies at you.

**David:** I understand. I should of told you the truth. Instead of lieing to you.

Crimson Group

**Darcy:** David, was it my falt you died?

**David:** Don't worry it's nobody's falt. It was my falt for not looking.

Amber Group

**Darcy:** I'am sorry I acted like a jeark because you wear going out with Jayne and I felt left out ever since you started going out wit her.

**David:** I forgive you and I'am sorr too for leaving you out of my life. I was to much in love with Jayne.

**Darcy:** I forgive you and I should have had exepeted Jayne in the first place instead of breaking you guys up. I miss you a lot.

Indigo Group

**Darcy:** How can you be here David?

**David:** I thing [think] its my falt.

Violet Group

**Darcy:** I am so glad I-I could talk to you.

**David:** Its not your flaut I died.

**Darcy:** It is my flaut I ran off.

**David:** Its not your flaut its mine I did not look both ways.

**Darcy:** Lets just top fighting. D-David your fading away.

**David:** I have one last thing to say I'm sorry! For bringing Jayne over.

Student “mini-plays” — Performance 2

A similar assignment was given in the latter part of the unit. The sentiment of these scenes was lighter and more sardonic than the previous assignment. Several groups created scenarios in which David did not die, while one group enacted a “conspiracy theory” to explain David’s untimely death.

Magenta Group script excerpt:

*(Darcy and David settle their differences before the incident so he does not die.)*

**David:** Why are you so mean to Jane?

**Darcy:** You mean the J-word?

**Narrator:** Darcy felt her whole body quivering.

*(Later in the scene)*

**David:** Darce, I am sorry for yelling at you about Jane. I know you feel uncomfortable with her.

**Darcy:** I know that you like her so I will give her a chance.

**Narrator:** Then they hug and kept being friends.

Emerald Group script excerpt:

*(David does not die.)*

**Narrator:** Darcy gets mad and runs. Daid runs after her but she runs too fast for Daid to catch on so theres a car and the car does not see Daivid and he get hit but does not die.

Darcy was so sad then she relized that she should let her brother love who he wants to and she expests [accepts] the neckless.

Crimson Group script excerpt:

*(David returns from the dead twice to speak to his friends, family, and Winston.)*

**Narrator:** One day Darcy, Same Winston were on the beach and found a sea shell.

**Darcy:** What a beautiful sea shell.

**Winston:** What should we do with this sea shell?

**Narrator:** Darcy, Same, Winston were hearing the shell and suddenly heard David's voice.

*(The voice of David apologizes for not spending time with Darcy. Later in the scene, the character of David visits the other characters while they are playing games.)*

**David:** I'm back.

**Darcy:** David is that you?

**David:** Your dum. I am a spirit. It was nice to see you guys but I got to hit the sky!

Amber Group script excerpt:

*(Girlfriend Jane hires a hit man to kill David with a car. All characters live but Jane goes to jail.)*

**Jane:** *(off to the side)* Here's the money.

**Car Driver:** *(Grabs money)* Ok. I'll run him over

Indigo Group script excerpt:

*(Fate of the characters unclear, but forgiveness is evident.)*

**Darcy:** I wish I could be a better sister.

**David:** It's ok. I wish I could be a better brother.

Violet Group script excerpt:

*(Characters progress, and students insert themselves into the scene.)*

**Darcy:** Hey Winston, want to come to the carnival with us.

**Winston:** Yah, I'll come. I will be there in a week.

**Darcy:** Why a week?

**Winston:** Because I'm in California visiting my grandparents.

*(change of scene to the carnival — now located in Wisconsin)*

**Charlene:** *(from the carnival scene)* Hey twerp! Long time no see!

**Darcy:** Where's stinky Eddy?

**Charlene:** There is no Eddy here. It's now Amanda *(class member)* the Great!

## **DISCUSSION**

During the first mini-play activity, it became evident that the students were taking to this new form of character study. It was noted in my teacher observation journal for the week of January 12th that although the noise in the room was considerably louder than usual, most of the students appeared to be on task. All deadlines were met, and each group was

eager to perform. The students' implicit wish to rectify a character's struggle indicated that not only had the students connected to the characters in the book, but that they desired to assist the characters in their difficult journey by offering emotional relief.

The second set of plays took this idea much further. There was a higher level of student input in constructing the story extensions, and groups explored variations on character development. One play created a satirical scenario in which a "hit man" is paid by the seemingly innocent girlfriend to get rid of David. This version was strikingly dark in its sense of humor, but nonetheless appeared to reflect a desire by the authors to cope with the loss of this character. Another scene was notably light in nature and focused on what happened to a minor character once the book had ended. Four of the plays recreated a scenario in which David was alive or present, had settled his differences with his sister, or could visit from beyond. As Fiske (1999) suggests, this exercise indicated that the students were being reached in new ways. Their inclination to resurrect the main character expressed a palpable hope. It also indicated their need to "right" the situation and alleviate the pain of the characters.

#### Talia's Connection

Talia took the reins in her group by selecting the characters, David and his sister, for their scene. While the group enthusiastically participated, I noticed that Talia assigned herself the role of director and scribe as well as lead actress.

In my journal for January 12th, I noted that the day after these presentations, Talia came to school with a present for me. It was an essay that she had written on her own and she wanted to share it. Here it is in its entirety:



*My grandma Nena*

*Hey! DiD you know my grandma? Well she was great person to me and everyone around her. even people she did not know cool right? One, the things she loved to do is 1. she loved her garden especilly taking care of it. 2. she loved me and my 2 brothers. 3. she loved being our grandma. Two. The wonderful things she did for me. 1. Is she took wonderful care of me. 2. She loved me with all her heart. 3. She was kind sweet. And all the most just "NenNa!" Three. The things she was proud of me for is me going to school and how I'm doing good and I'm trying. Finnily, my grandma loved me and that's all I need to keep in my heart forever.*

I was encouraged by her enthusiasm for this project and her response. I was hopeful that this might be the start of Talia's "opening up" and processing her difficult year. With the second wave of plays, Talia was once again a driving force in her group (teacher journal, week ending March 2). She has the narrator saying, "*Darcy gets mad and runs.... Daivid ... get hit but does not die. Darcy was so sad then she relized that she should let her brother love who he wants to and she expests [accepts] the neckless.*"

The next day, Talia again offered me a present that she had penned the previous night:

*The story of my life*

*Hi. I am [Talia] I am 11 years old in age. I love playing all kinds of things. First, I am living with 2 brothers and a grandpa and a xgranmma. I am Not so happy that I used to be. I mean imagin. Next, imagin having no mom and no dad and no gram that seemed like your mom. I have imaged. But what I imagined came true. And I mean live true. Then, I not happy because my mom passed away from drugs and my dad got in jail. My*

*“super” gramma passed away from a strok but I love my life still because of my family and teacher Mrs. Burns. Finnily I love my family and every one in it.*

Talia seemed to be using the novel and the dramatic activity to turn an introspective eye on her own life and connect in a truly meaningful way.

### **The Behavior Issue**

In both activities, Alphonse and Juan’s behavior noticeably shifted. In the first dramatic playwriting, rehearsal, and performance, they were engaged and focused. I noted (teacher journal, week ending January 12th) that both Alfonse and Juan exhibited “an unusual level of heightened participation and meaningful contribution to group work.”

During the second round of dramatic plays, both students were once again involved and centered during the process. Alfonse took a leadership role in his group and worked on developing a back story for one of the central characters of the novel. Juan was equally focused in his group work and visibly enjoyed what he was doing. In the final presentations, scripts were allowed in performance. Alfonse and Juan were the only two students in the class to fully memorize their lines, demonstrating a level of commitment that they had never exhibited in other classroom activities.

### **CHARACTER POSTCARDS — VISUAL ART PROJECT**

A visiting artist worked with me to develop an art lesson that would emphasize character development and plot as well as provide an artistic outlet for the students. We collaborated on developing a list of objects, easily attainable, that would trigger

recognition of significant scenes in the story. These objects were wrapped and placed in bag.

The students then blindly chose an object, opened it, and worked with their group to determine its meaning.

*Examples of some of the objects are:*

Object

Story significance

(as determined by teacher and artist)

toy football

-David was a star football player

feather

-Darcy found a bird on a sidewalk  
and tried to save its life when  
she was little

sea shell

-Darcy and Sam stayed on the beach

daisy

-Darcy and David rode in a truck on  
their journey with a donkey  
named "Daisy"

Once the students had determined the significance of their object, their challenge was to incorporate it into drawing that depicted a scene from the book, and then write a postcard from one character to another.

Many of the students identified the objects immediately. The visiting artist noted that a few students linked the object to an obtuse reference that we had not originally identified. This was surprising and suggested a deeper understanding of the connection between the object and the plot than neither the artist nor student had imagined.

The two following examples demonstrate the variety of final products that this project yielded:



Maria randomly chose a miniature football. Our original intent was to solicit a connection with the main character, David, as a star football player. Maria picked up on the imagery of the football as it was used later in the book when Darcy threw it to win a carnival prize during her journey. She wrote as Sam to Darcy:  
*Dear Darcy,  
That throw was magnificent and then you made [it] and got the bunny. I wish I got to throw the football well. that throw was great. were [did] you learn*



Carlos chose a seashell. He depicted a scene from the story in which Darcy and her friend Sam go to the beach in Florida looking for David's heart. His letter is written from Sam to his father, a peripheral character in the novel. His scenario describes a scene that never occurred in the novel.  
*Dear dad,  
I left a note somewhere at home. I am in florida to help darcy find david's heart. I will come home but darcy might not. Please tell darcy's parents to come hear so darcy could*

*to throw that great it was probley David  
sorry I asked. so great throw.  
Love,  
Sam  
p.s. those 3 kids that laughed were  
evil!*

*get over what happen.  
Sam*

## **Discussion**

Although not all student work showed the depth of connection that these two students demonstrated, the class was engaged and productive and exhibited an understanding of the significance of the objects that they had selected. I noted (teacher journal, week of February 23rd) that the sense of excitement in the room was palpable as the students anticipated opening their concealed objects.

Fiske's (1999) assertion that the arts reach students who are not otherwise being reached resounds in my observations of Carlos who had been a chronic "non-worker" and presented numerous challenges throughout the year. Carlos' writing to Sam's father suggests that he was making a connection to the loss of his own father to cancer two years ago. Although not conclusive, it was encouraging that he pursued this project with focus and effort and enthusiastically turned in a completed postcard.

### ***Talia's Connection***

Talia had been engaged and enthusiastic throughout this unit. By the time we did the final project, Talia was invested in the novel, the characters, and her connection to Darcy's journey.

Talia chose once again to reach back to David as a character after he passes away, while most students chose to focus on the living characters in the novel. Her postcard is from David to his sister. In it, David asks Darcy to forgive him.



Talia chose hearts as her object. These were thematic throughout the book— from the David’s actual heart, donated after his demise, to the heart necklace that David gave to Darcy and his girlfriend, thus prompting the fight that ended in the fatal accident. Talia fashioned the hearts into a necklace on a teddy bear (as in the book). Her letter was from the deceased brother:

*Dear Darce,  
I am sorry Darce. I did not know you would get mad. I just wanted you to have a great present and wanted you to have a great birthday. Sorry.  
Love,  
David*

As with previous arts activities, the next day, Talia had her own version of a postcard made from supplies she had at home. I noted in my journal that she also brought with her several of her grandmother’s earrings which she had wrapped carefully in blue tissue paper. She used the “heart” theme in the new postcard just as she done in her class project.



The front of the postcard shows Talia and her grandmother exchanging a heart. Underneath the caption reads, “my grandma hugs me because she loves me. She has a heart of gold.” On the reverse side, she writes a letter, as herself, to her grandmother:

*Dear nena,  
I just still want you to know I ♥ u! because you're my life and I  
will always keep you alive!*

Talia’s response touched me. It was the most indicative of a solid personal connection with the actual classroom activity. Although it is difficult to ascertain an explicit connection, she made a personal application with each of the unit’s activities. Her reactions demonstrated that the arts were perhaps helping to fill a void in this young girl and assisting her in the process of grief and acceptance during this tragic chapter in her life.

### ***Behavior Issues***

The most striking comment throughout this unit came from the visiting artist. I had dutifully tried to inform her of possible discipline problems and forewarned her that I might need to escort a couple of my students (namely Alfonse and Juan) from the room in order to maintain a productive environment. The lesson went off without a hitch. As the

artist was leaving, she asked me quizzically, “Were those ‘problem children’ absent today?” There had not been one incident of disruptive behavior from either Alfonse or Juan and, yes, they were present for the entire period.

### **Student surveys**

The students completed two identical surveys that asked them to rate their reading abilities in various categories: skill, comprehension, fluency, word recognition, personal connections to literature, and the ability to imagine text in pictures (see Appendix A).

The surveys were administered at the beginning of the unit and again at the end, 10 weeks later. Open-ended responses were solicited regarding their likes and dislikes and strengths and weaknesses in reading (see Appendix B).

### **Discussion**

I saw few notable shifts in student attitudes regarding their reading skills. Small changes occurred with the students’ perception of their ability to recognize words, and to write, discuss, and make personal connections to literature.

However, their responses to question 6: “When I read, I am able to see the characters and events in my mind,” showed a remarkable shift from 16 students in agreement to 25 (about 30%) in agreement.

Q6: When I read, I am able to see the characters and events in my mind.					
Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
16	10	2	25	3	1



The number of neutral respondents decreased from 10 to only 3. However, the strong indication that the majority of students perceived themselves as more skilled in visualization, above all other reading skills, shows a clear indication that Gardner's (2006) Spatial Intelligence may have been tapped through the integrated art projects in this unit.

In my journal (week of January 12), I noted that students were primarily responding to character and plot questions with concrete answers. Notes from the week that the artist visited our classroom (February 23) indicated that students were engaged and enthused about the visual art activity and that their responses to students had become abstract and personal.

In the open-ended portion of the surveys, the number of students claiming that recall and memory were strengths doubled from 3 to 6, and the number of students stating they had no reading strengths decreased by half from 4 to 2 (see Appendix B).

When considering the sharp increase in students who believe they increased in their ability to visualize a story, it might be assumed that there is a possible connection between visualization and story recall and fluency.

### **Standardized Test Data**

Eisner's (2002) promotion of the idea that the arts foster academic performance would not have credibility without ample evidence. Currently, standardized testing, or some kind of quantifiable data, is the predominant measure that brings credibility to qualitative data. So, I turned to my students' test scores.

In the fall, the students in my room tested at a baseline of 49.4% total correct on the Learning First standardized measure. There was an increase of 0.5% indicated on the winter test. This aligned with the beginning of our novel unit. The final test in the spring yielded an average class score of 73.4%, which demonstrated an increase of 23% overall for the class.

In the fall, Talia scored 43.8%. In the spring, her score was 87.5%— an increase of 35.7%. Alfonse began the year with a 28.1% baseline. His final score increased 12.5% to 40.6% in the spring. Juan’s scores increased 31.2% from a baseline of 46.9% in the fall to 78.1% in the spring.

## **Discussion**

It would only be fair to admit that the increase in scores is, at best, interesting. I cannot say that it is connected to this unit since my students were also taught testing skills in order to prepare them for this assessment and material from this unit did not appear on the test. These scores may indicate that after seven standardized tests, my students had become better test takers or it could be that a self-choice reading workshop that I implemented may have been a contributing factor.

My class experienced an increase in their math scores as well, a subject not directly tied to this unit, so perhaps the increase could simply be a class-wide trend. However, I must admit that I have not experienced this large of an increase in reading scores in my previous years of teaching.

## **Summary of Findings**

When undertaking this integrated unit, my class and I embarked on a journey. In attempting to answer my question, we took some unexpected excursions, which were not only delightful and profound, but also provided insight for me as a teacher.

The student surveys indicated that in some areas, students' perception of themselves as readers changed, with many students finding themselves able to visualize characters and events. The level of student engagement was considerable in dramatic portions of the unit. The visual art portion of the unit revealed extensive student insights into story line and characters. The standardized test data indicated that the class had a significant rise in reading test scores.

Talia's investment in this unit led to an entirely new strand of investigation for me. Her consistent connections to the drama and visual art activities, and her correlation between her life experience and that of the characters in the story, were unexpected yet remarkable. They give ample evidence that the arts activities in this unit, combined with the material in the novel, offered her the chance to process the recent unfortunate events of her life.

## **Conclusion**

So, what does happen to student motivation, self-esteem, and self-perception when visual art and dramatic arts are integrated with reading curriculum? There are clear indications that the arts are a vehicle through which students who normally are not touched by traditional curriculum can be reached. Motivation was extremely high and seemed to be transferable between arts activities and designated "reading" time.

There are also indications from the two surveys that students' self-perception as proficient readers increases with integrated arts as well as their ability to imagine, or visualize, story elements. Self-esteem was also demonstrated through involvement in class activities, assuming leadership roles in arts projects, and confidence in reading ability, as can be seen in the dramatic changes in Alfonse and Juan's behavior.

Reading standardized test scores in my class rose significantly, although these scores may not be directly related to the activities in the study. What these scores do indicate is the inarguable fact that a departure from standard reading curriculum and focusing on the arts for a significant portion of classroom reading time did not in any way detract from student achievement on standardized tests. Whether these tests indicate that the students learned to read or learned to take tests well is open to debate. However, this data provides, in an NCLB climate where test scores are the primary measure of success, a strong argument for the power of arts instruction.

Talia's connection to this unit supports Fiske's (1999) contention that the arts enable teachers to reach students not otherwise reached. While school counseling was in place for Talia, she had made little progress in processing her losses. Her engagement with the unit presents compelling evidence of the power of the arts to tap sensitivities within the human psyche.

### **Final Thoughts**

I taught an after school arts program this year to students from various classrooms. When I received the final verification paperwork, there was an indicator on the form that classified the class as either "instructional" or "recreational." "Recreational" was

indicated. It was, by no fault of the person completing the paperwork, a misnomer. It is a popular conception of the arts, but it made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Why was my reaction so strong? I ran through the reasons and it came down to this: the arts have become an afterthought in the development of our children, namely those in underserved, low-income, urban communities. They are no longer considered a valid form of learning or expression. They are a luxury only to be allowed once the “real work” is done.

As quoted in my literature review, Fiske (1999) asserts that “The arts provide learning opportunities for the adults in the lives of young people.” I am that adult. My admitted bias certainly lies in the arts. However, the transformation of my classroom and the unexpected journeys of three of my students provided abundant support for the arts as a valid tool in the classroom rather than a “recreational” activity. We all learned, and we all emerged with a new knowledge and understanding of ourselves and our abilities.

So where does this leave us? What next? I can’t help but think of the thousands, perhaps millions, of children in our classrooms across the nation who present the same challenges as Alfonse and Juan but because their school dollars are spent on test prep or special intensive reading programs, are never afforded the opportunity to learn or express themselves through the arts. I think of Talia, who immersed herself in the richness of the arts experience in order to process the tragedies of her life. Working in an urban environment, I am well aware that there are a multitude of Talias out there whose families do not have the resources to assist their children in the healing process. I am not an “art as therapy” promoter, yet these three children were clearly reached and transformed through the integrated study of the arts and literature.

And, finally, we face the question of “culture.” I shudder to think of the statement we are making as a society when the funding we are providing for the arts in our underserved communities is at best sparse. What are we saying to our urban children about their culture and their legacy? Are only our more affluent children in traditionally higher-performing school districts deserving of an artistic chronicle?

Time will tell what price we have paid for the watered-down curriculum presented to this generation of NCLB children. If no child is to be left behind, then all need to be celebrated and respected for being...children.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- Provide professional development for administrators and teachers and policy makers educating them in the merits of integrating arts activities into regular instruction time. *More* reading time is not necessarily the best practice when trying to reach all students.
- Make the state arts standards as readily available to teachers as are reading and math standards.
- Hold districts accountable for ensuring that these standards are addressed.
- Provide funding for arts coordinators who collaborate with teachers to develop curriculum that reaches all students.

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## Appendix A

### Student Survey Pre- and Post-Survey Likert Results

Survey 1 (n=28)			Survey 2 (n=29)		
Q1: I like to read					
Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
18	9	1	19	9	1
Q2: I am a good reader					
Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
12	12	4	13	13	3
Q3: When I read, I usually recognize all of the words.					
Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
12	12	4	15	11	3
Q4: When I read, I can remember the details of the story.					
Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
14	10	4	13	14	2
Q5: I like to write.					
Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
17	10	1	16	11	2



<p>Q6: When I read, I am able to see the characters and events in my mind.</p> <p>Agree            Neutral            Disagree</p> <p>16                10                2</p>	<p>Agree            Neutral            Disagree</p> <p>25                3                1</p>
<p>Q7: After I read, I find it easy to talk about what I have just read.</p> <p>Agree            Neutral            Disagree</p> <p>15                11                2</p>	<p>Agree            Neutral            Disagree</p> <p>18                9                2</p>
<p>Q8: In stories, I usually connect to characters or situations because they are just like me.</p> <p>Agree            Neutral            Disagree</p> <p>15                9                4</p>	<p>Agree            Neutral            Disagree</p> <p>13                10                6</p>

## Appendix B

### Student Survey Open-ended Question Results (1 of 3)

Question #	Survey 1	Survey 2
<p>Question 9: What do you like most about reading?</p>	<p>9 students responded that plot was the element they most enjoyed when reading            7 students responded that character development was important to their enjoyment while reading            4 students responded that acquiring knowledge contributed to their enjoyment of reading            4 students responded that fluency and reading proficiency gave them satisfaction            1 student liked being read to rather than reading himself            1 student expressed a desire to only read happy books            1 student said that writing made his reading experience more enjoyable            1 student said that talking about reading was what she liked most</p>	<p>7 students stated that they liked making connections to and visualizing characters            7 students said that getting involved in the plot was what they enjoyed the most            5 students said that reading quality literature was what they most enjoyed            3 students said that they enjoyed creating pictures to go along with a story            2 students said they liked becoming more fluent in reading            2 students stated that learning was what they liked most            1 student noted they become more relaxed when they read            1 student said she enjoyed extended novel activities            1 student said he likes having the teacher read to the class</p>
<p>Question 10: What do you feel are your strengths I reading?</p>	<p>7 students felt as though their strength was fluency and reading speed            4 students felt as though their greatest strength was visualizing story elements            3 students stated that their reading strengths were story recall and memory            2 students felt as though vocabulary was their strength            2 students felt as though their strengths lie in comprehension            2 students felt their strength was making connections to literature            1 student felt as though her strength was that she got excited about reading            4 students felt they had no strengths            2 students did not appear to understand the question</p>	<p>9 students noted fluency as a perceived strength            6 students felt that vocabulary recognition was a strength            6 students said that story comprehension and recall were strengths            3 students noted greater character understanding as a strength            2 students felt as though their progress/improvement was a strength            1 student felt that her ability to choose good literature was a strength            2 students stated they did not feel as though they had strengths in reading</p>

### Student Survey Open-ended Question Results (2 of 3)

<p><b>Question 11: What do you dislike most about reading?</b></p>	<p>9 students stated that unfamiliar or challenging vocabulary is what they dislike about reading            5 students stated various plot and story elements that contributed to as dislike of reading in given situations            3 students noted specific classroom comprehension activities that they dislike            3 students did not like books without pictures            2 students disliked having to put a good book down            1 student disliked having students read in class and preferred the teacher doing so            1 students disliked reading aloud            4 students claimed there is nothing they dislike about reading</p>	<p>9 students noted a dislike for unfamiliar vocabulary            7 students stated that fluency with grade level books is something they do not like            4 students noted that at times they disliked literature choice            2 students disliked when reading time ended            1 student disliked his perceived inability to comprehend everything            1 student disliked discussing his reading            1 student disliked when the teacher doesn't read            1 student disliked reading in groups            1 student disliked writing about his reading            2 students stated there was nothing that they disliked</p>
<p><b>Question 12: What are your weaknesses in reading?</b></p>	<p>10 students noted the inability to recognize vocabulary words as a weakness            5 students said that their weakness was the inability to write about what they had read            3 students said that lack of fluency was a weakness            3 students said that loss of interest with challenging selection was a weakness            1 student said that reading the same book twice was a weakness since the story was boring the second time around            1 student did not feel he had any weaknesses            3 students did not appear to understand the question</p>	<p>11 students felt as though vocabulary recognition was a weakness            7 students felt as though they struggle with fluency            3 students said that comprehending what they have read is a weakness            1 student felt as though writing about reading is a weakness            6 students did not feel they had any weaknesses            2 students did not appear to understand the question</p>

### Student Survey Open-ended Question Results (3 of 3)

<p><b>Question 13: What do you like about writing?</b></p>	<p>9 students liked the fact that they could express themselves through writing              8 students expressed that they liked the mechanics of writing in either cursive or specific writing structure such as essays              7 students liked the elements of fiction writing              1 student said that he enjoyed his improvement in writing              1 student expressed that he liked being assessed in writing              1 student said he didn't like anything about writing              1 student did not appear to understand the question</p>	<p>10 students said that they liked being able to express themselves in their writing              8 students enjoyed making connections to characters and storied through their writing              7 students liked meeting the challenge of answering a prompt              3 students said they enjoyed the mechanics of writing              1 student said he liked writing paragraphs only</p>
<p><b>Question 14: What do you dislike most about writing?</b></p>	<p>11 students responded they disliked mechanics of writing such as cursive, essays              6 students did not dislike anything about writing              5 students thought the physical act of writing was too challenging              3 students were frustrated at their level of skill in spelling              2 students stated they didn't like writing at all</p>	<p>12 students stated they disliked required format writing taught for standardized testing (extended response)              5 students disliked their inability get started when writing              4 students disliked their inability to write well mechanically (cursive)              3 students disliked writing 5 paragraph essays              4 students stated they disliked nothing about writing              1 student did not appear to understand the question</p>
<p><b>Question 15: If you could change one thing about reading class, what would that be?</b></p>	<p>13 students said they would like to have more independent choice in reading and more self-directed reading              4 students had ideas about specific literature in the curriculum              3 students said they would prefer less writing              3 students suggested that it be more fun but no specifics were given              2 students said he would prefer to read books with less challenging vocabulary              1 student said he wished he could make poor readers better              2 students did not appear to understand the question</p>	<p>9 students requested a longer reading period              8 students suggested more extended activities              7 students asked for more art and/or drama in class              3 students said they would change nothing about reading              2 students did not appear to understand the question</p>