Interdisciplinary Curriculum: The Benefits and Challenges

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Introduction

Every new semester brings a struggle and challenge for teachers to design appropriate curriculum. Teachers try to find and develop more compelling, useful, and meaningful themes, materials and activities for students. To appeal to the student’s interests and provide meaningful experiences, instruction should be connected to their real life. Seeking connections between students’ lives and their world is one of goals of interdisciplinary curriculum. Although the idea of interdisciplinary curriculum is not new, the issues related to interdisciplinary curriculum have attracted the attention of educators including music educators (Barrett, 2001, 2007; Burton, 2001; Ellis & Fouts, 2001; Reid, 2005; Snyder, 2001; Smigel & McDonald, 2011; Youm, 2007; Wiggins, 2001). Jacobs (1989) defined interdisciplinary as “a knowledge view and curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic, or experience” (p. 8).

While interdisciplinary curriculum seems to have many benefits, it is not easy to implement. One of main problems with implementation is that it may become so superficial and subservient to another subject (Barrett, 2001; Barrett, McCoy, & Veblen, 2000; Miller, 1994, Wineberg & Grossman, 2000). Barrett (2001) emphasized wholeness and completeness through valid connections and the organic bonds between music and other disciplines.

The challenges as well as benefits need to be examined in detail now. The purpose of this paper is to examine the benefits and challenges of interdisciplinary curriculum in music education at the elementary school level. In general aspects, the advantages and disadvantages of interdisciplinary curriculum will be covered and then the implications in music education will be drawn.
Barrett (2001) asserted that “a comprehensive music education embraces valid interdisciplinary relationships (p.28)” since it is fundamental for students to perceive connection in a complex world. However, when interdisciplinary work is implemented, the discipline of music is often distorted or trivialized. These superficial attempts at interdisciplinary curricular make music teachers disillusioned with interdisciplinary curricula and mistrust new initiatives. Also, students might be distracted from more meaningful learning. Therefore, she emphasized the integrity of music in interdisciplinary studies.

In order to illustrate how music educators can preserve the integrity of music learning while making valid connections to other disciplines, she presented practical examples of music class according to three domains of facets: contextual, elemental/structural, and expressive. In the contextual facets, the origins of music works are considered. In the elemental and structural facets, the salient features of the music are focused on: prominent patterns and sounds in rhythm, melody, timbre, harmony, and dynamics. A focus on elements and structure can also “lead outward from the music to other art forms” (p.30). Meter in poetry and music, line and contour in music and art, and repetition, contrast, tension, and resolution are some examples. In the expressive facets, students have opportunities to express themselves through the use of an extramusical work as the creative impulse for musical creation and expressive response. She asserted that the exploration of context, features and structure, and expressive meanings in music deepens students’ understanding and appreciation of music.

She stated that “an interdisciplinary approach to music education aligns students' natural tendencies to want to make sense of their experience and to integrate what they know into a working model, or ‘big picture’, of the world” (p. 31).

Cosenza, 2005
Cosenza (2005) argued that “if music teachers understand the cognitive connections and shared information among subjects, they have opportunities to enhance music learning in substantive and authentic ways” (p.1). In this article, she outlined some sample curricular designs as examples of how to integrate music learning with learning in other subjects.

According to her, while pre- and post-test designs to measure the learning in interdisciplinary curriculum have yet to be developed, educators are enthused about the concept of interdisciplinary learning for a number of reasons. Firstly, an interdisciplinary curriculum enables students to learn concepts from several cognitive and experiential points of view. The student can learn to infer or generalize from information learned in one subject area to gain understanding of the other subject area. Secondly, through team approach, more creative and innovative instructional design and implementation can be drawn. Lastly, it appears students in interdisciplinary curricular are considerably interested and engaged in learning.

However, she pointed out that since music class time is already minimal in the typical school setting, most music educators are unwilling to set aside any time for activities not perceived as authentic music learning. She said, this can be interpreted as their lack of interest in interdisciplinary curriculum, and, which can lead their exclusion from the initial planning. Consequently, most music educators balk at the idea of participating in any curricular projects in which they have little or no part in planning from the outset.

She concluded that “through conceptual thinking, music teachers may find that there are few interdisciplinary curriculum designs that cannot be interpreted in such a way as to promote authentic music learning and that hence develops children’s capacity for educative experience across as well as within the conventional divisions of the school curriculum” (p.5).

Miller, 1996
Miller (1996) explored how to integrate music authentically into elementary curriculum without sacrificing the music education goals. In her action research, she collaborated with language teacher to integrate music with a particular whole language first-grade curriculum. Through the 2-year research period, she began to view integration as an assortment of connections, identifying five types: topical, associated skills, conceptual, higher level thinking, and pedagogical.

According to Miller, the most common way for integration is topical connections. She found that when students perceived topical similarities between music and literature, they became more attentive and animated. The second category of integration is associated skills: she and her collaborative language teacher used the connection between declarative/interrogative sentences and antecedent/consequent musical phrases as an example of associated skills. Conceptual integration is the third category. The goal of conceptual integration is “to help students focus attention on the manner in which basic underlying concepts, such as those related to form, line, texture, and color, unify major disciplines” (p.109). Higher level thinking skills is the fourth category of integration. She gave an example of listening lessons emphasizing contrasting and comparing skills with active discovery. Lastly, pedagogical links between music and general class can facilitate children’s learning by using the same teaching strategies and techniques such as Socratic questioning, brainstorming, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring.

In the last section, she shared her experiences of the collaborative process. The hardest part in her case was finding a time to talk with collaborative teacher after each lesson. Also, she recommended researchers be able to give and receive criticism in an open mind and know the personality traits of the other collaborators.

She stated that “this research study informed my teaching through the emergent themes of student-constructed learning and the value of using various learning modalities” (p.110).
Youm (2007) examined how a team of teachers developed and implemented integrated instruction in the first-grade curriculum. The team composed of three first-grade classroom teachers and teachers of three arts: music, visual arts, and media. She investigated the steps of the development and implementation of integrated music classes, teachers’ role, and the characteristics of the entire process through observations, interviews, and analysis of documents and artifacts.

She found six steps in the development of integrated instruction: scheduling, determining the topic, teachers’ planning meeting, preparing for class activities, implementation, and evaluation. The process was complex and organic and all the steps were interconnected. For example, unexpected situations, such as teachers’ illnesses and school and class events, affected each step in the process. The formative assessment during the implementation step also influenced the next session’s planning. Moreover, she found there were roles shared among teachers, as well as independent roles for each. The students benefited from these teachers’ different strengths and roles, which is one of the reasons why integrated instruction is beneficial. For collaboration among the teachers, their time, resources, ideas, and energy, mutual support and respect for one another were required. She placed a strong emphasis on the principal’s support.

In the following interviews, the teachers stated that the integration made connections for learning concepts, enhanced student creativity and higher-level thinking, and improved students’ motivation to learn. This was in line with the researcher’s report that the students in the integrated music classes were very engaged and enjoyed every class. Finally, she recommended further study focus on children’s perceptions of integrated music classes.
Summary

The important goal of interdisciplinary curriculum is to provide integrated and meaningful experience to students, by making a connection among subjects (Ellis & Fouts, 2001; Youm, 2007). Barrett (2001) said it is students’ natural tendencies to want to make sense of their experience and to see a big picture of the world. Hence students were considerably interested, animated, engaged, and enjoyed in learning, when they found connection between what they experienced (Cosenza, 2005; Miller, 1996; Youm, 2007). Moreover, learning from several cognitive and experiential viewpoints deepens students’ understanding and facilitate higher level thinking (Barrett, 2001; Cosenza, 2005; Miller, 1996; Youm, 2007). When teachers collaborate for interdisciplinary curriculum, students benefited from more creative and innovative instructional design (Cosenza, 2005), teachers’ different strengths and roles (Youm, 2007), and pedagogical links facilitate students’ learning (Miller, 1996).

On the other hand, collaboration among teachers is not easy. Miller (1996) said the hardest part of collaboration process was to find time to discuss their work. Sharing teachers’ time, resources, ideas, and energy based on mutual respect and support were required (Miller, 1996; Youm, 2007). In addition, the development and implementation of interdisciplinary curriculum have several steps; the process was so complex and not only teachers’ close cooperation but also principal’s positive support is essential (Youm, 2007). However, the fundamental problem occurs when subject matter taught becomes less in depth since broad subject areas are covered. Superficial attempt and the problem of one subject being subservient to another should be sublated to make valid and meaningful connections among subjects (Barrett, 2001; Reid, 2005).

Conclusions

Despite all of the benefits and challenges of interdisciplinary curriculum are mentioned in
this paper, the inherent advantages of an interdisciplinary curriculum remain undeniable. Interdisciplinary curriculum can offer students a much deeper connection to the information they are learning, making school more interesting and, ultimately more relevant. The most difficult but fundamental thing in interdisciplinary curriculum is to make valid and organic connections among subjects. If we can find substantive and authentic way to integrate between music and other disciplines, it will enhance students’ music learning.
References


Sources Consulted


