

# Arts Education Partnerships: Informing Policy through the Development of Culture and Creativity within a Collaborative Project Approach

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Arts education partnerships have become an important means for developing and sustaining school arts programs that engage students, teachers, and communities. Tapping into additional perspectives, resources, and support from arts agencies and postsecondary institutions, arts education partnerships strengthen arts education infrastructure within schools and develop a web of sustainable relationships whereby stakeholders mutually benefit. This article provides a snapshot of an arts education partnership in action that develops creative and cultural competencies in middle school students through a theme-based collaborative project approach. This article informs policy by recommending support for arts education partnerships that develop social and creative capital among schools and postsecondary institutions and within the communities surrounding these institutions.

**Keywords:** arts education, creativity, culture, partnerships

## INTRODUCTION

Arts education partnerships have the potential to be a key component in developing and sustaining school arts programs that engage students, teachers, and communities. The 1995 formation of the nonprofit coalition Arts Education Partnership (AEP) brought together over 100 national organizations, including the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the U.S. Department of Education (USDE), the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA), and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to promote the importance and role of the arts in schooling and communities, as well as the potential of the arts to enable all children and adolescents to succeed within the present and for the future. Arts education partnerships in the twenty-first century continue to address the need for strengthening schools and communities and furthering cultural understanding while developing students' capacities for creativity, collaboration, and innovative thinking. This article provides a framework for the inclusion of arts education partnerships within music education, as well as a snapshot of an arts education partnership in action. These descriptions then lead to a discussion

of how policy can be informed through arts education partnerships.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ARTS EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS TO EDUCATION

Arts education partnerships offer the ability to tap into additional perspectives, resources, and support from arts agencies and postsecondary institutions, thereby strengthening arts education infrastructure within schools. Research on arts education partnerships indicates their positive impact on curriculum development, teaching, and learning. Corbett et al. (2001) find that arts education partnerships result in increased teacher collaboration, leading to stronger planning teams. According to Catterall and Waldorf (1999), partnerships help improve teachers' instructional practice and make them better able to meet the diverse learning needs of their students. They find that teachers become revitalized and more open to new ideas and risk taking, thereby improving their school climate. The AEP (1999) maintains that partnerships supporting in-school curriculum specialists and arts educators enable imaginative thinking about curriculum design.

Research results also demonstrate that arts education partnerships benefit student development. Participation in arts education partnerships improves children's self-concept and

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contributes to their social and emotional development and academic performance (Catterall and Waldorf 1999; Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga 1999; Corbett et al. 2001). Arts education partnerships also provide students with access to performance-based models of thinking, social, and personal skills within real-world contexts (AEP 1999). Deasy and Stevenson (2005) argue that student engagement in arts education partnerships moves students from being passive receivers to active creators, empowering them to play a fuller role in their creative learning.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF ARTS EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS TO PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Arts education partnerships have the ability to provide mutual benefits to schools and their communities. Partnerships enhance relationships within the community (Nelson 2001) and play a vital role in community growth (Buys and Bursnall 2007). The AEP states that “the arts are one of the most powerful means for forging bonds between parents, schools, and communities” (1999, 3). Communities offer resources and teaching artists to school environments; in turn, communities benefit from the change that occurs within students that allows them to impact their environment. The AEP claims that partnerships “enable young learners to reflect upon and represent themselves in their own communities, to become active citizens in their own neighborhoods” (1999, 4). In addition, state governments planning for the development of creative economies within communities may view arts education partnerships as a way to develop creativity and collaborative capacities in children, serving to sustain these communities into their adult working lives (Speiss and Lynch 2008).

### THE MULTIFACETED ROLE OF ARTS EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

The role of arts education partnerships is multifaceted. At their core, partnerships should develop a web of sustainable relationships: between students and the curriculum, between students and themselves, among students, among teachers, between teachers and school administrators, between the school and the community, and between the community and students. Arts education partnerships build a culture of collaboration through the sharing of resources, knowledge, and expertise for the purposes of artistic curriculum development and implementation. By working with school-based arts teachers and school administrators to improve arts education infrastructure, these kinds of partnerships work to improve accessibility to the arts and artistic engagement for all students.

### Teaching Artists within Arts Education Partnerships

Teaching artists have been a common component of arts education partnerships since the early 1970s (Burnaford et al. 2007). Burnaford et al. (2007) acknowledge that while teaching artists are typically not certified teachers, they are arts professionals who have a history of working in collaboration with arts specialist teachers or classroom teachers. Booth defines a teaching artist as “a practicing professional artist with the complementary skills, curiosities and sensibilities of an educator, who can effectively engage a wide range of people in learning experiences in, through, and about the arts” (2010, 2). Teaching artists can be an integral part of arts education partnerships, especially when they come from the communities represented by the partnership. Booth (2003) contends that teaching artists embody cultural integration within a curricular arts partnership because of their ability to integrate the curriculum and the community the artist represents. As a result, teaching artists have the potential to help develop webs of sustainable relationships. Second, Booth (2009) argues that the purpose of teaching artistry is to inspire participation in the expression of cultural commons and the creative process, so that the arts become relevant for everyone.

### Arts Education Partnerships Situated within Community Engagement

Buys and Bursnall claim that “the concept of community partnership is embedded in the broader notion of engagement . . . which provides the context in which partnerships can flourish” (2007, 74). They argue that community engagement is the process of communities (including universities, schools, and neighboring communities) reaching out to each other in order to build social capital. The members of community engagement partnerships are those stakeholders who engage in reciprocal and collaborative relationships (Bridger and Alter 2006; Boyer 1996). Cox (2000) maintains that stakeholders often need to define and meet mutual goals as a basis for removing barriers to access. When barriers are removed, community-based arts education partnerships encourage the development of educational capital in socially diverse and creative contexts.

### Benefits to Students

The benefits to students of arts education partnerships situated within contexts of community engagement are manifold. Gregory’s research suggests that students benefit from partnerships that provide them with support from the school, partnering arts institutions, and the community (personal communication, April 14, 2009). Students benefit from environments that support creative and collaborative thinking and multiple pathways to success. When the goals of stakeholders are aligned for the purpose of establishing progression routes

to success for students, opportunities within the partnership unfold.

## SNAPSHOT OF AN ARTS EDUCATION PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION

### The Guildhall Connect Model

The Connect partnership project model, developed in the United Kingdom at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, was the inspiration for the project described in the following section. The model developed its current form in 2001, when the U.K. federal policy agenda on creativity and cultural education (Robinson 1999) provided significant grant support for collaborative, creative, and cultural music performance, as well as for education community engagement projects—including partnerships between Guildhall, area schools, and community arts organizations. Artistic director Sean Gregory has described the core elements of Connect:

It's about working with young people from a wide variety of backgrounds, ages, abilities, and their musical experience. . . . At the heart of the work we do, it's about creating music, creating new music and performing it in a whole variety of contexts. . . . We want to provide progression routes that will actually give people the opportunity to keep developing and have the space to be creative and collaborative. [Connect is] enlightened and it's innovative and it presents lots of new opportunities and new ideas. . . . What comes through Connect, and it should be the case for all these sorts of projects, is that it really informs the cultural and artistic landscape of the future. (personal communication, April 14, 2009)

Connect is project-oriented and employs what Gregory describes as “workshop approaches to music-making in action.” In the Connect context, adolescents are encouraged to take ownership of the music they develop, using a cultural theme as a starting point. Connect projects take place within the framework of well-established community engagement partnerships between the Guildhall and various East London public schools and occur during instructional time. During school breaks and weekends, students attend sessions at the Guildhall. Connect projects are multimodal, encouraging students to continuously blend collaborative performance, cultural, and creative skill development in small- and large-group contexts. The processes of Connect work in tandem to meet students’ learning needs and interests while moving toward a final performance that demonstrates students’ and teachers’ collaborative work.

Connect projects often develop from a theme selected by teacher-leaders and students. This theme serves as a starting point for the development of creative and cultural connec-

tions. Connect project themes have included “The Planets,” “Kiss the Sky,” and “Urban Sounds.”

### Core Elements and Advantages of the Project Approach

Core elements of project-oriented learning often focus on problems that humans experience and the formulation of possible, although not ultimate, solutions (Dewey 1900). A theme of study—which is ultimately driven by the students’ interests (Kilpatrick 1918)—focuses the project. Kirio, Yamamoto, and Harada (2008) offer the following elements of project-oriented learning: (a) a cultural theme lies at the core and leads to in-depth exploration; (b) teachers function as facilitators; (c) students actively collaborate with peers and adults; and (d) students take ownership over their learning.

In the project approach, students actively engage in inquiry by considering problems and themes that resonate with their lives as well as the cultures and communities with which they interact. Within this framework, potential exists for bridging students’ lives inside and outside of school, which builds according to the relevance to the project. Multiple ways of exploring cultural and creative themes that incorporate different learning styles and modalities enable students to become active creators and producers. School-based teachers collaborate with community teaching artists to facilitate this process; the continual role exchange of teachers, artists, and students within the collaboration focuses upon process as well as the product. Such a project approach is both desirable and adaptable for general classroom and arts specialist environments, because it provides a framework for innovative curriculum, teaching, and learning.

### An American Context

The *Inspire* project takes place within the context of an existing community engagement partnership between an urban research university and a pre-K–8 public school in the southeastern United States. Following the design of Guildhall Connect projects, *Inspire* was launched in the 2008–09 academic year, with projects taking place at the partnership school. Projects are developed during instructional time with the school’s performing arts specialist teachers. In addition, a summer camp at the school brings additional students from the community to the site for additional *Inspire* projects. The stakeholders of the project include the performing arts specialist teachers (music, theater, and dance), school administrators, university faculty facilitating the project and disseminating findings, graduate students involved in the planning and facilitating of projects, middle school students, and community teaching artists.

The partnership’s urban school is a predominantly (97%) African American public school. Over the past decade, the school’s neighborhood has undergone revitalization, with improved housing for mixed-income families and improved school and community resources. The school has developed

a number of partnerships that enable additional curricular, teaching, and learning opportunities for teachers and students. The collaborating university's School of Music has had an ongoing curricular arts partnership with the school; therefore, a climate of collaboration, motivation, and trust between the school and university is already in place.

The *Inspire* project started as a response to school and university needs that could be met through a reciprocal partnership. Each year, the school places a curricular focus on Black History Month. The performing arts teachers wanted to develop Black History Month as a holistic project theme that would integrate the study of African and African American female artists with their creative and cultural approaches. The goal was to develop a collaborative project that would engage the middle school students in music, theater, and dance, culminating in a performance. The teachers had not previously worked together on an integrated performance project with a dedicated theme. Their needs were complex, and they required additional resources, knowledge, and expertise.

In March 2008, university graduate students had an opportunity to observe a Connect project at the Guildhall School of Music and interact with teaching artists who led these projects. They also visited other sites of community engagement employing teaching artists in the United Kingdom. From this induction, the graduate students developed facility in collaborative workshop approaches to music-making. They had an opportunity to employ these approaches with undergraduate students at the university and were prepared to implement the approach in a public school. The mutual opportunity and needs of the school performing arts teachers and the graduate students was the driving force for forming the collaborative *Inspire* project.

The success of *Inspire* projects is encouraged by their ability to bring together experience and expertise from a variety of sources. The performing arts teachers are artist-educators who are both experienced performing artists within the community and the larger urban area and experienced educators of middle school students. Their experience ranges from two to ten years, and they all have a very good understanding of adolescents' cognitive, social, and emotional needs. They are keen to use these collaborative projects focusing on culture and creativity to become an interdependent team. The graduate students involved are also artist-educators who have taught in urban public school music settings and have team-teaching experience from their work with undergraduate classes at the university. Outside these two groups, the project also uses community teaching artists, who bring unique cultural and creative perspective and expertise to the areas of music, theater, and dance, in addition to experience working with adolescents.

The students in the project are in middle school. They have taken performing arts classes and have had many opportunities to perform at the school and community events. They have had experience with curriculum integration approaches in their general education. Collectively, the performing arts

teachers, graduate students, and community teaching artists work together during the project to create a collaborative environment at the school for students to explore and creatively develop the cultural theme.

Similar to Connect, *Inspire* projects conclude with a culminating performance. However, the collaborative process that leads up to the performance is equally important as the performance itself. Before engaging in the project with students, the performing arts teachers, graduate students, and university faculty meet regularly at the school to form the project context and engage in workshop approaches to music-making. During the first cycle of the *Inspire* project, these meetings take place about every ten days between the months of October and December. The workshop approaches involve stakeholders in improvisatory, creative music-, theater-, and movement-based processes centered on the chosen theme of Black History Month. Each participant brings unique experience and expertise to the project, facilitating collective professional development as participants try out ideas and refine them for implementation with the students. The trust that develops among the teachers, graduate students, and community teaching artists provides a foundation for collaboration with the students. The second cycle of the project takes place between January and March, ending with a culminating performance at a community high school.

*Inspire* is an example of a community partnership embedded in the broader notion of engagement. *Inspire* projects encourage participants to develop multiple perspectives on the chosen cultural theme through creative expression. Moreover, the process and product of *Inspire* projects help to integrate issues of diversity within the framework of creative endeavors. The assimilation of resources and expertise within the school, from the university, and from the community is designed to develop collective social and artistic capital and to be mutually beneficial for all stakeholders.

## BUILDING BRIDGES INTO COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE ARTS

When schools, universities, and communities work together, school arts infrastructures have the potential to be strengthened, which in turn impacts and strengthens communities. Arts education partnerships like *Inspire* help to ensure sustained access to the arts and artistic processes for children and adolescents. Gregory describes how Connect projects in the United Kingdom have enabled the Guildhall to "build a relationship up with the young people we were working with" (personal communication, April 14, 2009). With the recent pressure on the U.S. government to reduce spending, the arts are once again on the chopping block. Policymakers must not turn their backs on the role that the arts play in binding communities together and creating culture. It is imperative that funding levels for the NEA and other arts entities be

maintained, so that a wide range of K–12 partnerships between arts institutions and educators can be sustained.

Partnerships like *Inspire* strengthen the professional development of all stakeholders, including university faculty. National and local grants that support the professional development of teachers working in partnership with universities need to be sustained or created to financially support the different kinds of professional development needed by all stakeholders.

The *Inspire* project engages adolescents through the exploration of cultural themes that they themselves perceive to be important and worthy of in-depth inquiry. Multiple perspectives are fostered by the community teaching artists involved in the project. There is potential to develop cultural oases in community areas that are in need of cultural development and support. These approaches are particularly appropriate as the United States becomes increasingly culturally diverse. Policy administrators need to develop arts education partnership grants that focus on the development of cultural diversity during school instructional time that will demonstrate positive impacts on the community.

Finally, the need to develop creative capital is a common conversation among state and federal policymakers. Oftentimes, the potential of the arts is overlooked in these conversations. A more sustainable approach to the development of creative capital is to view arts-based partnerships and community engagement as an integral aspect of P–12 education. Arts education must be reinstated as a curricular focus in public education, as public schools are a potential nexus for the development of creative capital, and arts education is its incubator. This nexus has a reciprocal relationship with the community. State and local governments desiring to increase social and creative capital in their communities need to make arts education partnerships a priority among schools, postsecondary institutions, and the communities surrounding these institutions.

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