

# Arts Integration in Northland, New Zealand: A Case of Socially Empowered Learning

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## ABSTRACT

*This article presents a comprehensive case study on arts integration with students from a small rural New Zealand school. In the spirit of mixed-methods triage (Martin, 2018c), three researchers come together from different parts of the world to present findings from their different perspectives and experience. Ralph Buck and Barbara Snook from the University of Auckland offer their qualitative research findings with Brittany Harker Martin of the University of Calgary adding her quantitative research findings. The authors outline the process and procedures of the studies and provide an overview of the methodological base from which findings were drawn. Research participants were six generalist primary teachers and their 61 students. The findings from this study include five themes that emerged with potential transferability for teachers and students attempting to implement arts integration in other locations. Overall, findings support the claim that through arts integration, teachers and their students are socially empowered and student academic achievement levels increase.*

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## KEYWORDS

*arts integration; arts education; learning through the arts; mixed-methods triage.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the spirit of mixed-methods triage (Martin, 2018c; Van Steenburg, 2020), this paper presents two studies, conducted simultaneously with the same research participants: one qualitative and the other quantitative. Unlike traditional mixed-methods research that seeks to triangulate data (Denzin, 2012; Fielding, 2012; Salomon, 1991), this paper juxtaposes an interpretive-constructivist study conducted by Buck and Snook from the University of Auckland and a positive-functionalist study conducted by Martin from the University of Calgary. Both studies are on the same phenomenon: the impact of adopting arts integration. However, the authors do not seek to reconcile the philosophical differences between their approaches, nor do they attempt to make sense of the findings as a whole, though they do arrive at a list of themes supported by the data. Instead, they present their different findings on the same phenomenon together, with the philosophy, “that sense-making of such findings need not reside in the academy, but instead, in the community of readers seeking to understand a complex

phenomenon,” (Martin, 2018, pg. 80). Thus, both studies are pragmatically presented here as one case study with the authors acknowledging and respecting ontological differences.

The New Zealand authors recognised applications of Martin’s socially empowered learning at work (Martin, 2018a) and its relatedness to learning through arts integration. Socially Empowered Learning is a theoretical framework that unites three streams of psychology to propose that when learning is group-based, creative and agency-rich, connected to real-world issues, and focused on social impact, students will experience empowerment and intellectual engagement (Martin, 2018a). An emerging international network of scholars are using Socially Empowered Learning (Martin, 2018a; Martin, 2018b) as a measurable intervention against student disengagement, with statistically significant findings around the world (Martin, 2018b). Within the arts integrated context of the New Zealand school, all four aspects of this definition (group-based, agency-rich, real-world, social impact) seemed to be taking place, and the research team decided to implement Martin’s metrics to capture a scientific perspective of the same phenomenon. All three researchers could see the value of combining qualitative and quantitative research. While the qualitative research focused more on teacher perceptions, the scientific evidence was focused upon student responses through pre- and post-surveys, and then measured against student’s achievement levels in maths, reading and writing.

Research suggests that time, space and a crowded curriculum often work against the implementation of ‘arts’ into classrooms, despite the arts being a mandatory inclusion in many school curricula, (Buck, 2003; Snook, 2012). Around the world, it is not uncommon for school leaders to hold a school musical or enter the school in an arts-based competition to satisfy the requirements of the arts curriculum. In that way, they have ‘ticked the box’ relating to the inclusion of arts in their students’ learning. Arts integration offers an inclusive approach to learning where all students are given equal opportunities to learn creatively. This allows students to take risks and grow in confidence. According to Chemi (2014),

The arts generate an emotionally safe environment in which individuals can dare to experiment, learn, and deal with complexity (p.374).

Arts integration can be understood as arts and academics being taught together, “with each reinforcing the other,” (Rabkin & Redmond, 2004, pg. 18). The most effective arts integration embeds learning outcomes from arts curricula into non-arts subject areas (Eisner, 2002; Martin, 2017). Evidence suggests however, that if teachers have not experienced the arts in their own education then it is unlikely that they will include it in their own classroom teaching (Crews Stitt-Ghodes, 2001; LaJevic, 2013; Snook, 2012). Many generalist teachers lack confidence in teaching arts subjects and a common misunderstanding of the arts pervades. Likewise, many teachers believe that in order to teach an arts subject, they must be skilled in that art area themselves (Martin, 2019). In many cases, generalist teachers have little understanding or experience of using the arts as a process, and tend to view arts education in silos of performance and presentation (Buck & Snook, 2016).

In the situation of visiting artists, an arts programme often lasts only as long as funding is available. Such programs signal to teachers and students that arts integration is an optional extra, and not an everyday curriculum aspect of learning. For arts integration to be sustainable, it must be taught by generalist classroom teachers in their own classrooms (Buck, 2003; Snook, 2012). To do this, teachers who are inexperienced in teaching the arts need support and professional development before being expected to teach through arts integration.

In Canada, Martin & Calvert (2018) found that arts integration is an effective form of Socially Empowered Learning. At the same time specialists from the University of Auckland Dance Studies

Programme were engaged in introducing, supporting teachers, and monitoring arts integration at a small New Zealand school. For the present study, our research questions are three-fold:

- How do teachers make pedagogical shifts in order for arts integration to be effective?
- Does arts integration in this case increase students' social empowerment and intellectual engagement?
- Is there a positive effect from arts integration on academic performance?

## THE CASE

In a small, rural town in Northland, New Zealand, school administrators engaged the caregivers at the focus school in a survey, asking what they wanted most for their children. The respondents indicated that what they wanted for their children was for them to be happy in their learning environment, to care about others and to become good people. The school Principal saw a possible solution in arts integration, and was enthusiastic about introducing this pedagogy to his staff and students.

In May, 2017, Buck and Snook recognised this as a case study with potential to investigate how arts integration effects student engagement and how this, in turn, may have an effect on academic achievement. They quickly learned that the teachers at the school were not as enthusiastic about using arts integration as the Principal, and encountered a good deal of resistance from all six teachers who had not been included in the decision-making regarding arts integration. The scholars suspected this resistance was related to limited staff engagement in the decision to change.

Winter and McEachern (2001) cite Hinson (1991) who states, "Often in the shorter-term educational change can cause disruption and insecurity among teachers," (p. 2). Had time been allowed to include the teachers in discussions around the benefits of arts integration for their students, then the transition may have been smoother. People need to understand the value of the change and it may be that "they are not sure that they will be successful with the change," (Williamson & Blackburn, 2010). Heavy-handed methods or a lack of consultation can cause opposition (Winter & McEachern, 2001). The study was conducted over two years, during which time the teachers' confidence in their implementation of arts integration grew.

Often where arts integration is implanted in schools, artists play a role in either leading the implementation or working cooperatively with the classroom teacher. This project involved an arts integration specialist, with an emphasis on empowering the classroom teachers to take ownership of a different pedagogical approach to teaching and learning. In order to support teacher professional learning, an arts integration expert was appointed in the school, on staff to model arts integration lessons and also to work with teachers on ways they could personally take the arts integrated planning forward. This individual was coached by Snook who also provided the teachers with professional development during allocated days throughout the school year. Exemplar lesson plans were provided according to what areas or concepts teachers wished to implement in their classrooms. Additionally, they were directed to readings and resources that were designed to extend their knowledge of arts integration.

Following the arts integration specialist's lessons with teachers, a discussion would take place identifying what did and did not work and how they could follow up the arts integration lesson with another before their next session together. Teachers added arts integration to their teaching incrementally: During the first term the teachers were expected to teach one fully planned arts integration lesson a week, two lessons a week in term two, three lessons in term three and by term

four they were expected to teach an arts integration lesson each day. While this may not have happened with every teacher, it provided a goal to work toward.

Buck and Snook were able to work closely with the teachers in the small Northland school providing professional learning and gathering qualitative evidence along the way. There was a need for everyone to work together (Smilan & Miraglia, 2009) and there was clearly much to be learned from this approach. Arts Integration was new to everyone in the school and while the outcomes were successful, had there been time to provide support in working collaboratively, alongside the support for the implementation of arts integration, both the expert and the teachers may have benefitted.

Learning a fundamentally different approach to classroom teaching is not any easy task, particularly for classroom teachers who are expected to implement arts integration in their classrooms. Such was the case in this research context: a low decile, predominantly Maori, New Zealand school expected to implement arts integration. Arts integration can hold many different meanings to different people depending on a particular context (Buck & Snook, 2017). It can be a programme delivered by artists who come into a school for a period of time and deliver arts content connected to curriculum. It can be an inclusion of the arts as its own area of study within the curriculum, regardless of whether arts subjects are mandatory. Arts may be integrated as a method of reinforcing learning, such as painting a picture of 'what we did today at the event'. Indeed, the term arts integration has been used to describe a variety of arts-based activities in a variety of contexts. Mishook & Kornhaber (2006) discuss a project involving 18 different schools where the Principals each had a different definition of arts integration. They state,

Multiple meanings for the term "arts integration emerged from the interviews. Some of the descriptions of arts integration given to us clearly were instances of strong arts instruction (p.6).

The University of Auckland promotes arts integration as a process of learning where the arts are employed to engage students in arts activities, designed specifically to teach a concept, so that students may work cooperatively and creatively to problem solve. There is no emphasis on being right or wrong, but rather on exploring ideas. Koff & Warner (2001) state,

Integrated teaching deepens education by allowing students to enter each project with their strengths, to build up their learning weaknesses within a safe environment, and to explore ideas in their natural context so that the ideas are connected, thus creating greater possibilities for the retention of the concepts (p.143).

In this case study, the pedagogical emphasis was on the group-based doing, making, problem solving and collaborating, and in working this way, students came to appreciate and develop skills in socially making and performing during the process. Thus, for this project, arts integration was defined as an arts-based process through which students construct and demonstrate understanding of a concept in another subject area. Although the literature on arts integration suggests that it benefits academic performance, (Rinne, Gregory & Yarmolinsky, 2011; Robinson, 2013), there is limited empirical evidence to support this (Mishook & Kornhaber, 2010), especially in line with this definition. There is a clear gap in our knowledge, and a need for more research in this area. While Winner & Cooper (2000) suggest that there is not yet enough evidence to suggest a link between arts integration and academic achievement, this study provides both empirical and qualitative evidence to support our positive research findings, adding to a growing body of knowledge.

## METHODS

Pragmatically speaking, our study employed a mixed-methods case study (Cresswell, Shope, Plano Clark & Green, 2006), as mixed-methods triage (Martin, 2018c), using observations, interviews,

academic performance scores, and pre/post survey data. The resulting qualitative and quantitative data are collated here to provide diversity in perspective and a breadth of research evidence. All methods were administered by the University of Auckland researchers, as approved by their Human Participants Ethics Committee.

Qualitative data were gathered through observations conducted in parallel with the professional learning model. Initially, the teachers were resistant to change. Adopting Eisner's connoisseurship theory (Eisner, 1998; Smith, 2004), allowed the researchers to work closely with them in the school. "Connoisseurship is something that needs to be worked at – but it is not a technical exercise. The bringing together of the different elements into a whole involves artistry," (Smith, 2005, p. 3). As former classroom teachers, all three researchers were able to observe and discuss pedagogy as insiders. This was a very valuable research tool, as the culture of schools can be difficult for outsiders to penetrate and understand. In addition to providing the facilitator for professional development, the University of Auckland researchers employed interviews and observations as methods of gathering qualitative data.

Interviews with teachers were conducted at regular intervals to ascertain their perspectives on how they were adapting to a new pedagogical approach. A constructivist theory offered a clear observational platform from which the process of change was able to be observed (Fosnot, 2013). Teachers were asked to embark upon a method of teaching that was unfamiliar to them and for this reason, their journey through the implementation of arts integration in their classrooms required a great deal of support from the program facilitator. The teachers also responded to questions relating to whether their students' behaviour and confidence had improved and whether their students were more engaged in the classroom. Informal staffroom discussions were reflected upon and notes were taken on these and other observations. The documentation of observations, along with the interview data were collated to uncover a coherence of meaning.

Quantitative data were gathered through pre- and post-surveys from a sample of 61 students. The student sample was relatively gender balanced (53% female). Surveys were administered with students from year 3 to year 8 at the beginning and at the end of the 2018 school year. The survey was composed of Martin's (2018a) Socially Empowered Learning scale that includes demographic items followed by measures of Social Empowerment (18 items based on subscales for Collective Efficacy, Bandura 2000; Group Potency, Guzzo, et al., 1993; and Shared Agency, Martin, 2018a) and Intellectual Engagement (6 items). Survey data were analyzed using paired samples t-tests.

Quantitative data were also gathered in the form of academic scores. Data on reading, maths, and writing were acquired (anonymized) in order to assess whether there was a relationship between programme effects and academic performance. This was analyzed through correlation analyses using Kendall's Tau-b.

## IMPACT & EFFECTS

The first full day of professional development resulted in the teachers really enjoying the arts integrated processes, in turn recognising how much their students would enjoy engaging in arts integration lessons. They could see the positive possibilities for academic achievement. Darling and Richardson (2009) cite Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss and Shapley (2007) who found that "sustained and intensive professional development was related to student achievement," (p.48). It was through the participatory act of "doing" that the teachers came to understand and appreciate what arts integration was all about.



According to research notes: *One teacher took all she had learned from the professional development day and taught all the activities in her class the following day. She was full of enthusiasm regarding the students' observable engagement. Other teachers moved into arts integration more slowly.*

During the year, more professional development took place, and the arts integration specialist was provided with lesson plans and coaching from the University of Auckland team to help her with her planning. Together, they reflected on the success level of lessons and slowly moved forward with teachers beginning to recognize and share successful lessons of their own.

During the two years that they used arts integration; the teachers grew in confidence. They even presented at a conference, and expressed pride and true ownership of the work. According to the research notes: *One teacher stated that she felt she, "really owned arts integration and was excited to share what we'd seen happening with our students." She emphasized, "we know it works." This young teacher felt that she gained an enormous amount of confidence by sharing what she was doing. She stated that her, "students are far more confident especially in oral language." The teachers received really good feedback from the conference and stated that, "the time we had was too short. We had heaps of questions and heaps of people emailing us and lots of people looking at it and saying, great idea."*

The pedagogical shifts for teachers were observable. They worked through a process of change that was not easy for them, especially when considering that they had not been a part of the decision-making regarding arts integration in their school. According to research notes: *one teacher commented, "I really wasn't on board for about six months and was resentful that we had to do it, but slowly I could see the benefits it was having on my kids and how much they were enjoying this type of learning. Now I am really seeing a difference and I am probably the greatest advocate of arts integration at this school."* In this sense, the teachers experienced their own social empowerment, through their shared, creative and agentic experience witnessing impact of social change in their own classrooms.

In terms of quantitative evidence, we found a statistically significant increase in Social Empowerment ( $t(60) = 3.25, p < .05$ ) and Intellectual Engagement ( $t(60) = 2.71, p < .05$ ). Findings for subscales (Engagement, Collective Efficacy, Group Potency, Shared Agency) were also statistically significant, and reliabilities were all robust (.82, .83, .80, and .92 by Cronbach's Alpha).

Further, we also found evidence that students who were engaged in arts integration showed an improvement in their academic results in maths and writing. In testing the relationship between arts integration and academic performance, we found that writing achievement is correlated with post scores on all three subscales of Social Empowerment (Collective Efficacy = + .313, Group Potency = + .244, Shared Agency = + .292) and with Social Empowerment = + .296. Reading achievement scores increased slightly, but did not correlate with post scores; however, math achievement is correlated with post scores on Collective Efficacy = .247.

## DISCUSSION

By taking the time to work in the school over two years, the researchers had allowed the teachers to develop a solid understanding of arts integration and they had built enough confidence to be able to go and speak to others. By speaking at a conference, they came to own arts integration at their school. They took their understanding of what they were doing and were able to explain, "we don't just do lots of drama and dance and music and visual art, we are focusing on our curriculum areas and using the arts to teach them."

The quantitative data provides meaningful evidence on the effects of arts integration; and the qualitative evidence reminds us that, in order for arts integration to be sustainable and successful, the teachers need to increase their own confidence in the arts, and receive adequate professional development. For this reason, through mixed-methods triage, this case reveals that it is vital to introduce an arts integrated pedagogical approach into teacher education institutes.

Together, the separate studies of this case study provide evidence to support the following five themes:

1. Teacher resistance to arts education can be overcome with embodied knowledge through experiential professional learning;
2. Arts integration is engaging for teachers and students;
3. Teachers who feel ownership over their arts integrated pedagogy will practice it;
4. Arts integration is socially empowering;
5. Arts integration has a positive impact on student academic performance, specifically maths and writing.

Thus, this study has scientific significance for numerous stakeholders: for the University of Auckland, there is empirical evidence to support their arts integration professional development and support as a way to increase engagement and academic achievement; for faculties of education, there is data to inform practices in teacher preparation; for governing agencies, there is powerful evidence of the effect of arts integration in schools, especially with marginalized populations; and for teachers, there is evidence that arts-based practices are effective; last, for scholars using Socially Empowered Learning, there is more evidence from another country to support this as a universal tool for instructional design and empirical research.

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