

“Where is *our* art?”¹

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Tuesday, January 2, 9:42 a.m.

Ortiz Elementary School: Sefe arrives in the office predictably, having been kicked out of his 5th grade reading class – again. Sefe has a history of creating disturbances during this two-hour reading block.

The green ticket written out by his teacher reads,
“No homework.
Throwing paper.
Drawing pictures of guns (see attached).
Refused to work.
Disruptive despite warnings and time out.”

Sefe sits in the office with a writing assignment the teacher, Sandra James, has given him to complete. The assignment is about his behavior and owning his part in his disruptions. When she picks him up after reading at 11:00 a.m., he has written a full page. Initially she is pleased. Then she reads.

“This suk.
U suk.
Shcool suk.
Riding [reading] suk.”

Over and over and over. He has also drawn several pictures of guns as a border around his paper. Mom is called in for a conference – again.

By NCLB standards, Sefe is failing. He is a recent transfer into Ortiz Elementary, arriving with no records from his previous school. Sefe may have learning disabilities, but managing his behavior is the first challenge. Sandra has attempted to ascertain his abilities by collecting work samples, but Sefe rarely even begins an assignment, let alone completes it. His grades reflect little or no progress in reading despite the efforts to assist him with intensive phonics-intervention strategies designed to help struggling readers. He is also enrolled in the after-school reading program, provided by an outside company, that promises increased test performance. When the class is tested in the spring, he most likely will fall “below standards,” which will not bode well for Ortiz.

Sandra was frustrated. “I am doing everything I am supposed to,” she bemoaned to a colleague during a planning period. “Maybe there is a difference between what we are ‘supposed’ to do and what is right,” her veteran-teacher friend replied. It was enough to get Sandra thinking.

Ortiz Elementary

Ortiz Elementary is in a large city district that has a sizable portion of its schools on academic warning per the No Child Left Behind standards. Many of these schools are overcrowded and the facilities, particularly in the low-income neighborhoods, are run-down and in need of repair. Ortiz is 95% Hispanic and 94% free or reduced lunch.

¹ Based on *The Art of Reading: A Look at Student Motivation, Self-Esteem, and Self-Perception When the Arts are Integrated with Reading Curriculum*, an action research project by Meg Burns (TNLI MetLife Fellow) 2007.

Poverty, substandard facility conditions, violence and a limited English culture are all factors contributing to the lack of progress of the students at Ortiz.

The district has required a two-hour reading block for all schools to deliver more reading instruction in the hopes of boosting test scores. Many under-performing schools, such as Ortiz, have after-school reading programs, some provided by independent contractors. The district administers its own set of three reading exams in addition to the one extensive spring exam already given by the state. Ortiz was given a choice of reading series to help improve its test scores. These included intervention strategy manuals, overhead transparencies, five-day lesson plans, workbooks and leveled readers. By all appearances, Ortiz has ample tools at its disposal for success. While some students responded to this approach to reading instruction, others fell through the cracks and failed to achieve with even the most effectively designed reading program.

Thursday, January 4, 11:17 am

Ortiz Elementary School: Sandra's students are studying Egypt in social studies. Using her computer to project graphics for the whole class to see, she demonstrates the significant relics of the Ancient Egyptian culture.

The Egyptian drawings, the jewelry, the ornate sarcophagus of a fallen pharaoh, the sculpture, the architecture, hieroglyphics; all legacies to a great culture, all enduring remains left behind for future generations to learn, remember, and appreciate the flavor of a long-past culture.

The class reverberates with "ooohs" and "ahhhs" over the visual aides, particularly the sarcophagus. "I'm gonna be buried in that when I go! In style!" announces Sefe with envy.

Then a hand shoots up in the back of the room.

"Yes, Sofia? Question?"

"Mrs. James, where is our art?"

Sandra asked for clarification. "Sandra, you mean your art class?"

"Not really. *Our* art. Like Egypt. If we remember ancient Egyptians by their art, then how are people going to remember us?"

Sandra was dumbstruck. Before she had considered the absence of a full-time art teacher and lack of arts instruction mostly a nuisance for the teachers and an unfortunate void in the curriculum that she might be able to fill with occasional activities. She thought about the lack of resources available for her students in their lives outside of school and realized the broader-reaching statement these new priorities made to the students who were affected by them. The arts were no longer a priority. And to some children, that meant neither was their legacy.

Jim Connors

Jim Connors was a "teacher's principal." He knew how to talk to and manage teachers. He empathized with the reality of the classroom dynamic. He knew that good teachers could and would do anything to get their students to learn. But he also knew that with curricular freedom, there came responsibility. If one teacher was "allowed" to veer from the prescribed mandated basal program, then all should be allowed to do so. This program, although arguably not ideal, managed to help some teachers remain "on track" to deliver the expected goals, while it stifled others.

Jim Connors had entered a failing school at the advent of No Child Left Behind nearly four years ago. It was an uphill battle for Connors in this already under-served neighborhood. He had inherited a largely disengaged staff, a dormant PTA, and a moderately active school council. His budget and facility were in shambles. Connors had a lot of work to do when he entered Ortiz.

Connors began the painful process of ascertaining the areas of instruction of lesser importance in order to help his school comply with district mandates. After cutting several part-time positions and moving his budget around, he was able to add another person to a literacy team. However, this also meant that two full-time positions in art and music were cut to part-time. And unless there were state goals and valid learning activities involved to justify the break, recess was cancelled as well. There was simply no time. He was conflicted about these decisions. However, the district was pleased that Ortiz was in compliance and that the children would be receiving additional reading instruction.

When he had been in the classroom, Connors had embraced the ideas of Howard Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences*. Gardner's theory, that each individual learns through a variety of "intelligences," interested Connors since he was a predominantly visual learner himself. Gardner asserts that there are eight intelligences at play in each individual to varying extents, and that everyone processes information differently. Therefore, some children learn better through visual cues (the most frequently occurring intelligence), others learn best through audio, while some might learn best through movement and physical activity. NCLB testing requires that children be tested in two of their intelligences: linguistic (reading) and logical-mathematical. As a result, many mandates require that instruction occur solely in these two areas, despite the learning tendencies of the individual child.

Connors knew that the implementation of two-hour reading blocks to comply with the district was not necessarily the best solution in order to reach the children in his school. In addition to his knowledge of Gardner, Connors was well aware that the limited English environment in the largely Hispanic population was a major factor in his school's reading deficiencies and that a longer reading block would not necessarily deliver better reading instruction.

Connors was, therefore, conflicted about reducing the time of his art and music teachers. He knew that meant some grade levels would not receive any arts instruction at all. Connors was well aware that there was something lacking in his schools curriculum with the absence of the arts. He also knew that cutting recess might also be problematic, particularly for those children who need to "move" in order to learn.

An attempt at a solution

Connors decided to invest time and resources into staff training in multiple intelligences. He sent representatives to workshops to learn how to appeal to the many intelligences of each child, and they returned with their knowledge and provided professional development for the rest of the staff. They showed how to develop multiple intelligence "units" in order to address several learning styles. Although these practices seemed ideal, many teachers found that implementing them within the structure of the new basal series was problematic. Teachers complained that the rigidity of the basal program did not provide for the flexibility needed to implement Gardner's ideas. Those

who were able to find a way to integrate multiple intelligence methods were saddled with redesigning the reading curriculum to fit in their multiple intelligence activities. Teachers who adhered to the basal series disputed that changing the structure of the curriculum was counterproductive to the original intent of the district mandate. There was concern among the staff that there simply was not enough time during the school day to implement the mandated materials, let alone enhance required instruction with a multiple intelligence curriculum. Staff multiple intelligence advocates struggled with what they called “Gardner Lite” as a band-aid for the much bigger issue of a curriculum that simply did not address the individual needs of each student. As a result, many of these practices were applied sporadically with the limited knowledge gained at the staff in-service sessions.

In the meantime, some students were receiving one 40-minute art period every five days for two quarters, while some were on the same schedule for music. Teachers were also beginning to notice that the students were having a difficult time enduring two full hours of at-your-desk reading instruction. Connors was well aware that this situation was not ideal, but he hoped that his school’s test scores would reflect the additional time and resources put into reading.

A turning point

In planning for her basal lesson, Sandra reflected on an excerpt from a novel about a young Mexican immigrant girl, which was culturally relevant for her students. Sandra could not stop thinking about Sofia’s query, “Where is *our* art?” Sandra had an artist friend who was particularly deft at Mexican folk art. Although she knew it would be difficult to justify, she still felt as though there was a place in her instruction for an art lesson. Sandra asked her friend, Mari, to do her a favor and visit her class, pro-bono, and teach her children a lesson in paper cutting. Mari was happy to help.

Sandra managed to pull together some supplies off the sale shelves of the local art store, since no art supplies were provided for in the budget. Her children were excited about the visitor, and Sandra rehearsed the routine of how to manage supplies and listen to instructions over and over. She was very concerned that she had to take a day off of reading instruction in order to complete this project, but she knew that, if questioned, she could justify its instructional value.

She was also concerned about her behavior issues, namely Sefe. She made plans to have Sefe removed if need be. She forewarned her friend about some difficult children but assured her that she would manage them if things got too challenging.

Mari arrived in her usual artistic fashion. There was something different about her that enthralled the children. She didn’t look like a “teacher” per se. She wore a flashy, hand-painted scarf that fluttered as she gestured. She showed the class examples of Mexican art and used words like “delightful” and “juicy” to describe elements of certain images. She asked the children how they “felt” about a piece. It was so different from anything they had experienced.

The lesson moved smoothly. There were no real incidents with the supplies. The children were guided through the paper-cutting technique and produced pieces that they were proud to exhibit.

As she left Sandra's class, Mari asked, "Those 'behavior problems' – were they absent today?" Sandra realized that neither Sefe, nor any of the other challenging students, had acted up throughout the two-hour "reading block."

...who are not otherwise reached

Sandra remembered a compendium of research about the use of arts in education, in which Edward Fiske (1999) had asserted, among other things, that the arts "reach students who are not otherwise being reached." This resonated with her as she reflected on what had transpired in her classroom. Although she knew she had "broken the rules" by devoting "art" time during designated reading instruction, she also relished the fact that all of her students, Sefe in particular, were engaged in a meaningful way while making a connection to literature through art.

What had happened to Sefe? Why was his reaction so different when Mari was present? Sandra was also familiar with the work of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE), in which schools with artistic partnerships were tracked and documented over a six-year period (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999). Those schools that engaged in arts partnership programs increased their sixth grade reading scores nearly 20%. Sandra sensed that although the direction of reading instruction mandated by the district might reach a few students successfully, there were many students, particularly in her neighborhood, who were missing something by having such a focused curriculum.

Sandra had been a teacher long enough to remember when the students received arts instruction and music at least once a week. She also remembered the days of shorter reading periods and having time in her day to teach social studies or science. Although she understood why the district felt the need to enhance reading instruction, she was unclear why a longer period of reading became the solution for a better reading curriculum.

She decided to take her observations to her principal who had a favorable reaction to Sandra's experience. She wanted Connors to loosen the restriction of the two-hour dedicated reading block in order to allow more freedom in curriculum design. She had visions of bringing in an actor friend to produce a play as well as a dancer to teach dance during that time. He was supportive of her efforts and even happier with the results she reported. But, his school was also on the rise in regards to test scores, the widely accepted measure of success in the NCLB era. He was under pressure to produce and the percentage-gain goals superimposed on him by the district administrators were directly tied to his job.

He knew that dedicated teachers like Sandra would not abuse a looser rein on reading block time. He knew that if he allowed Sandra to deviate from the prescribed program, she would design engaging and exciting activities for her class. However, he did not have the same faith in all of his staff. He informed Sandra that although he was enthusiastic about her vision for her reading class, he would have to ask that she stick as closely to the basal program as possible for now, in order to adhere to the district's requirements.

Discussion Questions

1. How does a principal encourage creativity in instruction and at the same time hold his staff accountable for delivering the requirements of his district?
2. What impact does cutting arts programs, particularly in under-performing inner city schools, have on students?
3. Should teachers ignore the mandates from principals and their districts in order to deliver instruction in a way that they feel best serves the children in their classroom?
4. How can teachers organize and advocate for the arts in urban under-performing schools?
5. Do higher test scores in math and reading truly demonstrate that learning has occurred?
6. How could the NCLB mandate be changed to address more areas of learning such as the arts?
7. Is it a fair proposition to allow some teachers curricular freedom to utilize their instructional time in a way they feel best, while holding others to a strict district-wide program?

References

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