

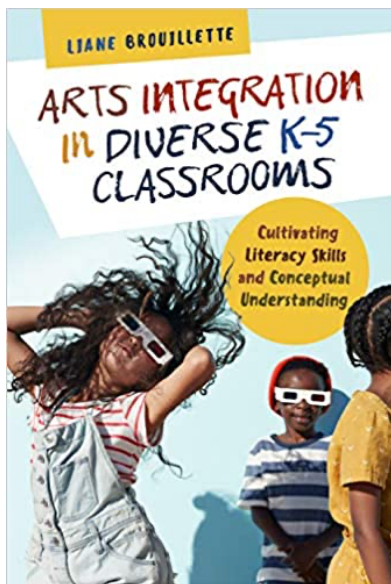
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JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE & LITERACY EDUCATION

Review of Arts Integration in Diverse K–5 Classrooms: Cultivating Literacy Skills and Conceptual Understanding

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Brouillette, L. (2019). *Arts integration in diverse K–5 classrooms: Cultivating literacy skills and conceptual understanding*. Teachers College Press.

ISBN: 9780807761571

Introduction

As a teacher educator of writing pedagogy for P-5 pre-service teachers, I am constantly looking for resources that I can provide to my students, especially resources that challenge them to think about multimodal and critical ways of teaching writing beyond just teaching words on paper and conducting canned writing drills. Most often, teachers and teacher educators focus heavily on the teaching of skills and “competence” in literacy classrooms. However, this approach undermines, and at times ignores, the myriad literacies that students bring with them into the classroom, such as their creative expressions, critical awareness, home languages, family practices, digital literacies, or civic engagement. On the one hand, students’ daily literacy practices can function as scaffoldings and funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) that connect their homes/communities with classrooms. On the other hand, more importantly, classroom teachers have the responsibility to invite students’ out-of-classroom literacies into the classroom and show students ways in which they could (and should) be critical and responsible when engaging in myriad meaning-making processes via various modes of expression.

When I came across *Arts Integration in Diverse K–5 Classrooms: Cultivating Literacy Skills and Conceptual Understanding* (Brouillette, 2019), I was excited. It has always been an important consideration in my pedagogy instruction to include the arts in literacy instruction. I think it is crucial to use arts as a vehicle (1) to foster students’ identities, diverse literacies, criticality, and creativity and (2) to develop their understanding of content and skills, because students engage in artistic and multimodal ways of meaning-making in their daily lives through technology (e.g., Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram Stories, Youtube, etc.) or their cultural practices (e.g., music, dancing, drama, cooking, writing, etc.).

This reviewed book provides insightful arguments and concrete ideas for teacher educators and in-service and pre-service teachers to (re)consider their understanding of literacy instruction and push them to think about the merits of implementing arts in their literacy classrooms. In the following sections of this review, I will outline the main ideas of each chapter. Then, I will synthesize the chapters holistically while providing my critical reflections.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1: Deepening Understanding Through Arts Integration

The first chapter provides a brief historical overview of national policies that overemphasize standardized testing and a theoretical overview of literacy education and arts integration. Brouillette opens the book by pointing out that the purpose of this book is to “identify areas in a crowded K-5 curriculum where arts integration can both spark genuine aesthetic experiences and assist students in mastering demanding literacy skills” (p. 1). Here, literacy skills refer to standard-based reading and writing skills that foster comprehension. Throughout the book, Brouillette focuses on how arts integration can boost students’ literacy performances with two key aspects: meaning-making and effective expression (p. 8). Then, she stresses the importance of concrete representation for children’s understanding of concepts, and how visual and performing arts could provide effective vehicles to help children represent abstract concepts to themselves. After operationally defining arts integration as “an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form” (Silverstein & Layne as cited in Brouillette, 2019, p. 2), Brouillette challenges teachers to consider, explore, and engage in creative processes by examining connections between an art form and a content area. Then, she reviews historic national policies that lead to an extreme emphasis on standardized testing and the significant drawbacks to standardized testing.

Finally, Brouillette argues that the merits of incorporating arts in the classroom includes its ways of (1) boosting “achievement” (p. 8) through integrating listening and speaking skills and (2) supporting healthy literacy development by giving students opportunities in the classroom to construct and demonstrate understanding.

Chapter 2: Making Meaning Through Verbal Interaction: Laying the Foundation for Literacy

Chapter 2 focuses on the importance of verbal interactions in children’s meaning-making process, and how verbal interactions could be fostered through performative arts. Brouillette offers many specific strategies and activities that teachers could implement in their classrooms to integrate acting, theater, and improvisation within the mandated curriculum. In particular, through showcasing how a teaching artist and a classroom teacher collaborated to dramatize storytelling in a kindergarten classroom, Brouillette illustrates how acting could (1) provide rich opportunities for vocabulary development because students could touch, see, feel, and experience meanings of words, (2) prompt students to deeply reflect on characters and settings of stories by vividly bringing different aspects of a story to life, and (3) challenge students to do meta reflections on their embodied experiences as actors of characters in books. Brouillette also stresses that emergent bilinguals can benefit from the process of embodying vocabulary learning through performances, as they are hearing, doing, and understanding the vocabulary. Students’ simultaneous use of their bodies and voices can boost their comprehension and memory (p. 23).

Chapter 3: Making Meaning of Narrative Text

Chapter 3 puts a spotlight on the genre of narratives, and ways teachers could dramatize narratives to help students develop their understanding of narrative texts and literacy skills. To start this

chapter, Brouillette reviews the power of the written narrative. Specifically, she employs a historical perspective and focuses on the impact of the invention of the Greek alphabet in 800 B.C.E. To follow, she argues that stories could support the social and cognitive development of students when they are written and dramatized simultaneously. For the remainder of the chapter, she showcases narrative texts and drama and literary activities that could deepen students’ understandings of narratives. For instance, she uses *Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter* (Mah, 1999) as a text example and storyboarding as an activity example, to demonstrate how representations of experiences can be formulated through art and how this process can lead students to explore and relate to archetypal human dilemmas on an emotional level (p. 43).

Chapter 4: Making Meaning from Informational Texts

Chapter 4 centers on ways students can be engaged in meaning-making through informational texts. Brouillette showcases several activities. First, she describes “Developing Common Core Habits,” an activity that requires students to do “close looking” artwork, consider the painter’s intentions behind specific choices in elements, and give an overall response about how the artwork makes them feel. This series of activities align with Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts that focus on close reading and questions that elicit text-dependent responses. Then, Brouillette describes strategies that could boost comprehension of “academic language” and the “language of science” (p. 52) through connecting the arts to science, using movement to aid visualization, prompting deeper learning, and drawing connections to students’ personal experiences. Lastly, Brouillette demonstrates how STEAM (STEM + Arts = STEAM) lessons can take place. In these lessons, arts integration strategies were used to scaffold science

learning; concepts were made memorable through music and movement; and drawing, painting, and dancing provided “children who are yet abstract thinkers with concrete methods for envisioning phenomena that they cannot directly observe” (p. 58).

Chapter 5: Building Effective Oral Communication Skills

In this chapter, the author concentrates on how teachers can help students build oral communication skills through arts integration. For example, Brouillette describes how students used puppet theater to explore different roles and what it is like to walk in another person’s shoes, in different languages. Integrating puppetry in the classroom helped build students’ communication skills and confidence.

Additionally, Brouillette describes how arts could be integrated into content areas such as social studies. Teachers could have students analyze and describe illustrations in informational storybooks to explore geography and history. Music could be used to (1) help students from different cultural backgrounds build rapport, (2) learn about the American Revolution and other historic events, (3) study cultural migration, and (4) employ poetic and/or artistic license.

Chapter 6: Expression Through Narrative Writing

Brouillette begins this chapter by reiterating the importance of narratives: “Students’ literacy skills are linked to the ability to tell a story that can be understood by listeners who were not present when the events occurred” (p. 77). The activities and strategies exhibited in this chapter focus on the creation of written narratives and how arts could be used in different stages of this narrative writing

process to prompt “skill-based gains in student writing abilities” (p. 91).

One of the artistic modes of meaning-making is visual arts. Images could be used to convey complex ideas to students or used as inspirations for writing. For example, Brouillette describes how teachers could use images as discussion starters or as artifacts to prompt students’ imaginations and reflections on their personal experiences. Another showcased project, “Writing in the Museum” (p. 78), challenges students to become an artist and to observe, reflect, and write. This project engages students’ artistic perceptions and helps them translate their visual observations into written and oral language. Additionally, in another activity, Brouillette describes how students could use images, movies, or TV shows that they are familiar with as a starting point, to imagine new worlds, people, relationships, and stories. The process of story-writing from students’ personal experiences spans across writing workshops over multiple weeks. In this continuous and reiterative process, students not only develop their narrative writing skills, but also reflect more deeply on their personal experiences.

Chapter 7: Expression Through Informational and Persuasive Writing

Chapter 7 depicts the purpose and process of informational writing, and how multimodal texts and ways of expression could be used to prompt students’ writing of informational texts. Brouillette points out that informational writing is “a form of problem solving” (p. 97). It requires students to determine what their potential readers need to know, then decide what kinds of explanations need to be provided. One way to get students to think about what and how they want to write in their informational texts is creating classroom dialogue with images. These dialogues could be framed for the purpose of prompting students to think deeper about their ideas, in terms of details, major actors

involved, colors, and spatial relationships. As for the reading of informational texts, teachers could challenge students to use visual tools to record and organize their thoughts, such as hand-drawn concept maps and Venn diagrams with various foci. Brouillette concludes that the goal of incorporating various modes of meaning-making is to help students develop the skills to move freely between images and words.

Chapter 8: Building Executive Function Skills with Arts Activities

In Chapter 8, Brouillette engages in a conversation about how arts could build “executive function skills” for children, which would not only lead them to “academic success” but also support their “work and relationships throughout life” (p. 107). She employs Corbett and her colleagues’ definition of executive function: “an overarching term that refers to mental control processes that enable physical, cognitive, and emotional self-control and are necessary to maintain effective goal-oriented behavior” (Corbett et al. as cited in Brouillette, 2019, p. 107). As students’ language and subsequent literacy skills improve, their ability to verbalize and write their goals, (re)work their initial articulation for themselves, and communicate their intentions and desires to others also improve. She argues that arts-focused activities can assist students in refining their executive function skills. To conclude the chapter, Brouillette lists and describes activities that include dancing, music, movement, drama, poetry, visual arts, and storyboarding (respectively) to demonstrate how the teaching of executive function skills can look in practice.

Chapter 9: Bringing the Arts Back to the Language Arts

Arts integration is an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. In Chapter 9, Brouillette

concludes the book by stressing the significance of integrating arts in classrooms, as arts “bring an active, engaging dimension to classroom routines, [and] lets teachers keep the spirit of exploration alive” (p. 121). She provides an overview of the previous chapters, as well as important takeaways for each chapter. Finally, Brouillette explicitly compares arts integration with arts transfer, and points out that educators should provide direct instruction and guide young students to apply art skills to other content areas, instead of assuming that students will make the connection on their own.

Critical Reflection

As a teacher educator that teaches writing pedagogy, I would definitely recommend this book to my (pre-service teacher) students, as well as in-service teachers. In this book, Brouillette situates arts integration in reading and writing pedagogy in a practical way that is easily accessible for practitioners. Moreover, in addition to English language arts, many of the strategies listed in this book apply to the content areas, such as science and social studies. From reading this book, it is apparent that arts integration strategies could contribute to building students’ content knowledge, as well as content area literacies.

In her writing, Brouillette (1) tells stories about the brilliant collaboration between teachers and teaching artists, (2) showcases reflections of lessons and activities by practicing teachers, (3) provides website links to specific lesson plans and resources that teachers could incorporate in their classrooms, and (4) offers the theoretical and historical grounding of arts integration in K-5 classrooms. This rich content introduces a more artistic and multimodal lens for teachers to (re)consider their existing teaching approaches or pedagogical design to literacy instruction. Teachers or pre-service

teachers who are considering including images, music, dance, and drama as a way for their young students to explore the writing process or as a way to understand vocabulary or content knowledge can easily incorporate strategies in this book to their instructional approach. However, it is crucial to stress that these practices are not novel, as many volumes and articles have discussed ways of incorporating arts and multimodal texts (broadly defined) in literacy classrooms. Also, Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and other Communities of Color already have long histories of literacy pursuits that are collaborative, multimodal, and artistic in nature.

Another merit of the book is that Brouillette heavily situates the description and justification of arts integration in the CCSS. Many of the lessons and activities are designed for the purpose of meeting the literacy skills mandated in the CCSS. This book could provide teachers who work in contexts with more restrictive expectations and strict curriculum mandates with language and tools to justify their curriculum design, if they wish to incorporate multimodal ways of meaning-making in their curriculum.

This merit can also be a shortcoming. Although in Chapters 2, 3, 5, and 6, Brouillette does discuss ways to include students' identities, personal experiences, and home languages in classroom activities through arts integration, the starting point and final objective of these lessons and activities are still literacy skills prioritized in standards. The heavy focus on skills and "competence" may erase diverse students' myriad languages, literacies, cultures, histories, abilities, genders, and communal practices. This erasure may hinder students' literacies development, social-emotional health, and critical understandings of their own communities

and the world around them. In addition to skills, it is important for teachers to center students' pursuit of identity, intellect, and criticality (Muhammad, 2020). I suggest using this book in conjunction with books written through more critical lenses and written with children from Communities of Color and diverse backgrounds in mind, such as:

- Baker-Bell, A. (2020). *Linguistic justice: Black language, literacy, identity, and pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Kinloch, V., Burkhard, T., & Penn, C. (Eds.). (2019). *Race, justice, and activism in literacy instruction*. Teachers College Press.
- Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic Incorporated.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (Eds.). (2017). *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.
- Ryan, C.L., & Hermann-Wilmarth, J.M. (2018). *Reading the rainbow: LGBTQ-inclusive literacy instruction in the elementary classroom*. Teachers College Press.
- Skerrett, A. (2015). *Teaching transnational youth—Literacy and education in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.

Overall, *Arts Integration in Diverse K–5 Classrooms: Cultivating Literacy Skills and Conceptual Understanding* offers in- and pre-service teachers a rich platter of texts, activities, and lesson plans that integrate arts in literacy instruction. It could be handy for teachers, as a starting point, to think about lesson design that includes images, videos, illustrations, movements, music, and drama.

References

- Mah, A. Y. (1999). *The Chinese Cinderella: The secret story of an unwanted daughter*. Puffin.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
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