



2022 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES  
SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENGINEERING, ARTS, MATHEMATICS & EDUCATION JUNE 7 - 9, 2022  
PRINCE WAIKIKI RESORT, HONOLULU, HAWAII

# ART INTEGRATION: EMBRACING DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL IN EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM



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**Art Integration: Embracing Diversity and Social Emotional Learning in the Elementary Classroom**

**Synopsis:**

In this workshop, we will demonstrate and apply the connection between visual art integration, culturally diverse students, Universal Design for Learning, and social and emotional learning in the elementary classroom. You will be provided with powerful tools that you will be able to immediately apply in the elementary classroom.

## **EMBRACING DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM THROUGH THE ARTS**

### **ABSTRACT**

*As teacher education candidates engage their students in culturally relevant content, they need an arsenal of skills and strategies to support student learning while they celebrate the diversity of their students. Integrating the visual arts, social and emotional learning with literacy or other content areas for diverse populations of elementary students is a powerful tool for engaging, maintaining and sustaining culturally relevant classrooms.*

### **What is Art Integration?**

As a former elementary and middle school teacher, art was always that place where students could learn more than just a skill or a trick. My mother, a teacher-artist, taught me that art is a bag of tricks; I would add that it is much more. I have seen art bring kids out of their shells and provide them a safe space when perhaps they are not accepted by some of their peers. It can be a space where kids can solve problems, try out new ideas or even new identities; a space where they can belong. Before middle school, students in the elementary classrooms need to be introduced to the arts that are meeting them where they are, both culturally and linguistically.

As stated in their website, American for the Arts (2015) regarding art education for students, “The arts are essential. They teach students innumerable lessons—practice makes perfect, small differences can have large effects, collaboration leads to creativity. The arts also teach children that there are several paths to take when approaching problems and that all problems can have more than one solution.” (para 2)

The arts can be intertwined and integrated with core content to enrich, engage, and provide alternatives to standard assessments that may be a barrier to student learning.

According to The Kennedy Center (2022), “Arts Integration is the approach to teaching and the vehicle for learning. Students meet dual learning objectives when they engage in the creative process to explore connections between an art form and another subject area to gain greater understanding in both” (para 1). The Kennedy Center defines art integration as dual learning where creativity is heightened to explore new content. Working in the elementary classroom long ago, we had thematic units where we connected the arts and core content as part of our daily practice. We valued the arts as we look back to our old thematic units. Long ago this was the gold standard; art integration had one central theme or focus that tied across multiple content areas.

## **What Happened to Art Integration in the Elementary Classroom?**

As teachers in the early 2000's we entered the era of NCLB, Open Court and scripted curricula with little to no art instruction or integration. If art was a part of the weekly agenda, it was reserved for a Fun Friday activity or something to do after kids finished their weekly assessment and then maybe it was a fun coloring page. We, as teaching professionals, were mandated into the demands of scripts and standardized testing with little time to teach the arts. According to Shaw (2021),

Although the arts were considered a core subject in the 2001 federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, they were not factored into annual testing or related sanctions against underperforming schools. As a result, instructional time in the arts was cut back. (para. 10)

In the KM Perform article, McDonald (2016) writes:

When the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB Act) was passed, it put more focus in schools on core subjects like math and reading. Because of the focus on these subjects, schools are forwarding more money to the areas that require standardized testing in order to keep the scores high. The NCLB Act caused schools to focus on grades and test scores, while pushing the funds to keep those numbers high, arts classes that required schools to purchase supplies for students were cut first, leading to a huge drop in arts opportunities in schools. (para. 2)

Our purpose here is to bring back those days of thematic units where we collectively led kids to experience a whole child centered approach with art integration at the center. We have a great opportunity to share this with our novice teachers who are coming to the profession, seeking much more than what they experienced in the K12 classroom.

## **How Can We Add Art Integration to Higher Education for Teacher Candidates?**

We can start with showing our elementary teacher candidates how this can be done. They need a comprehensive elementary art education starting with the elements and principles of art and design and a rich exposure to not only the Western canon but art that represents the students they serve. Art from cultures that their children see and are exposed to on a daily basis, street art, murals, books and texts with faces and skin tones that represent them. Art from Latin America, Africa, Middle East, Eastern Europe, Hawaiian-Pan Pacific, and other cultures that can be highlighted and provide them a mirror where they see themselves. From there, based on cultural responsiveness, candidates then can integrate art into their thematic units as they meet the diverse needs of their varied students.

## **Does the Western Canon of Art Provide Students of Color Representation?**

According to artist and scholar, Justin Korver, in his work with teachers and students, he reflected in a personal communication:

Representation matters because there is a lot of work in imaging a world that you are not a part of; network matters if you don't see yourself connected to other people, a social network. That is really hard. In the K5 classroom, students are indoctrinated into a Western mode of thinking, 'who am I related to? I am related to people who look and sound like me'. We have all had that experience where we are most connected to people who may not look like us. (J. Korver, personal communication, April 27, 2022)

According to Chung and Li (2019):

A culturally responsive pedagogy requires art teachers to understand the different learning styles of ethnic students and their cultures. It empowers students to become capable learners who appreciate their cultural heritages and lived experiences and utilize their learning styles to develop critical thinking and act on unjust issues. (p. 2)

Teaching just the Western canon alone can create negative outcomes. For one, students of color won't see themselves represented in the works if we promote an insular perspective of art with the heroes and artisans of art being old white men. Furthermore, we are not using this opportunity to expand students' tolerance and cultural understanding of different ways of knowing and being. "In a culturally responsive art class, teachers would encourage students from diverse cultural backgrounds to share their cultural traditions, including the mainstream American tradition" (Chung & Li, 2019, p. 4).

As elementary teacher educators, we can embrace these pivotal opportunities to share rich ways of being outside the confines of even our most diverse classrooms, while encouraging students to share their culture through rich experiences of appreciation as well as creation.

### **Art Vocabulary: Elements of Art and Principles of Design**

Art integration starts with the basics; teachers and students need to have a solid foundation in the language of the arts. It starts within the elements, like the basics of the alphabet, to anchor students in the most foundational knowledge of line, shape, form, value, space, color and texture (MASSART, 2022). Once students understand the alphabet of art then they can understand how to use the elements in the principles of design, much like a writer uses letters to create sentences to create compositions. The principles are based on how the artist manipulates, organizes and integrates the elements through: rhythm, balance, emphasis, portion, gradation, harmony, variety and movement. For students, this is key; and for teachers, our obligations and responsibilities are that students know and understand the elements and principles as they are integrated into the

core content. Once there, students can begin to look at art through a critical lens, hence teaching the basics of art criticism. This sounds like a lofty task for elementary teachers, but the end results allow students access to a language and form that they would not have had otherwise.

It may be as simple as going back to the Fun Friday activity yet basing it on art vocabulary. It may be as easy as teaching “What is a line?” by using the artwork of Jose Ramirez and how he uses thick black lines to outline subjects; or his use of vibrant color as it differs or is the same as those in the Western canon of art such as with works from Rafael Sanzio.

From there, we can teach the art in teaching by integrating it with core content within thematic units. Demonstrating how to maneuver teacher’s editions to include inlets to the arts takes mastery of the pedagogy; it is the job of those in higher education to expose new teacher candidates to this model. Hence, why we have come up with four basic ways to do this.

### **The Top Four Ways to Get Culturally Responsive Art in the Elementary Classroom**

- 1. Through Children’s Literature**
- 2. Through SEL Activities**
- 3. Through Advocacy for All Learners**
- 4. Through Universally Designed Learning (UDL)**

#### **Reading and Art Integration: Viewing from a Cultural Lens**

Children’s literature is an important tool for teachers to integrate in their classroom instruction. Specifically, introducing multicultural children’s literature provides students with a variety of perspectives. This type of literature can be used to not only engage a robust selection of texts, but also to teach about topics such as racism, religious belief, gender equity, and socio economic class divisions, among others that are not often introduced in scripted and one-size fits all curricula. Children can use diverse literature to build background knowledge in various content areas while also building varied literacy skills (e.g., character recognition, plot familiarity) concomitant with literacy skills (e.g., reading comprehension, read-aloud fluency). Through the use of multicultural literature, children are introduced to topics of diversity and classroom conversations, with meaningful dialogue around these topics providing a different learning opportunity for children. The cultural lens that students develop through teacher-led engagement with multicultural literature provides space for them to foster critical discussion of the broad ranges of diversity topics in ways that are age-appropriate. Thus, students learn to broaden their perspectives on, and understandings of, society and their important place in it.

Teaching children to critically evaluate text, specifically illustrations in this case, is important as it allows for students to gain the knowledge of reading and writing mechanics while also teaching self-efficacy and agency (Freire, 1970). In other words, students will learn to read and

write through literacy instruction while also learning to critically analyze texts among other things not taught in standardized instruction.

To better understand this notion, the authors interviewed the visual artist, children's book illustrator and third grade teacher at Esperanza Elementary, Jose Ramirez. Located in the heart of the Pico-Union School District in the Westlake region of Los Angeles, California, Esperanza Elementary consists of a predominantly Latin and Salvadorian community of students. Jose has served the majority of his teaching career at Esperanza. As an Angelino, he was born and raised nearby in Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles. The award winning children's book illustrator's work emphasizes the value in having artists of color create literary illustrations for children of color. His illustrations in the children's book, *When the Angels Sing: The Story of Rock Legend Carlos Santana*, written by Michael Mahin, was awarded the Pura Belpré Illustrator Honor and a Robert F. Sibert Honor. He comments that new teachers will need support as they implement children's literature and art that reflects the children they serve. Art integration can be incorporated into core content such as science, reading and math. Jose reflects, "Art can do a lot" (J. Ramirez, personal communication, November 3, 2021).

Classroom activity suggestions for reading and art integration include the following:

Activity 1: Read-alouds are an important component of an elementary literacy program.

Consider a read-aloud with a culturally relevant children's book to actively engage students in the learning process. This strategy positions students at the center of learning while shifting the teacher to facilitator and cultural advocate.

Activity 2: After selecting an authentic, culturally relevant children's book, consider honing in on text connections, specifically text to self. This simple strategy allows students to deepen their understanding of the ideas they are reading and their history, beliefs, culture, and values of themselves.

## **Social and Emotional Learning in the Diverse Classroom**

When implementing Social Emotional Competencies in the classroom, you are preparing all of our youth to practice self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills and social awareness to help them navigate the diverse world with confidence. According to the Charles Butt Foundation's Texas public schools opinion poll, parents in Texas rate Social Emotional Learning as one of the top two areas, outside of academics, they want their children to learn in public schools. Research shows that the development of holistic learners can build resiliency, confidence and the ability to cope with adversity, which proves to be a critical component for at-risk students.

According to Tyng et al. (2017):

Emotion has a substantial influence on the cognitive processes in humans, including perception, attention, learning, memory, reasoning, and problem solving. Emotion has a particularly strong influence on attention, especially modulating the selectivity of attention as well as motivating action and behavior. (p. 1)

Letting students get in touch with their emotions through art is a low risk way of encouraging students to express themselves, especially for marginalized students. Social emotional learning addresses the whole child and helps give voice to students while increasing their confidence and ability to navigate the world.

Classroom activities driven by Social and Emotional Learning include the following:

Self-Awareness Activity: Have students create a self-portrait depicting personal and cultural characteristics of themselves. Hang these in the classroom and label the wall “My Beautiful Classroom Family” or any other self-affirmation you would like to have in your classroom.

Self-Management Activity: Have students create desktop faces depicting moods/feelings like anger, sadness, fear, happiness, loneliness. Assign a color to represent each feeling and on the back of the face list strategies to manage those feelings. Teachers often find it helpful for students to choose their feelings face in the mornings and place it on their desktop to help initiate a conversation about their mood/feelings. Being aware of how you feel is the first step to managing or maintaining (i.e., happiness) those emotions.

### **Advocacy for All Learners**

Not only cultures but diverse and varied learners can greatly benefit from the arts at the elementary level. Leading expert and prize winning author, Dr. Temple Grandin advocates that parents and caregivers need to work with school sites to ensure that elementary students have access to the arts. She claims that these classes provide access to skill and career building opportunities for the future as well as essential social interactions with their peers. Educators agree that they have succeeded in delivering effective lessons when students are participating in discussions, demonstrating interest in a topic, and are curious to learn more. While the classroom vision for many teachers includes a collaborative learning environment, it can be challenging to identify and implement the most effective strategies to achieve that outcome. Making meaningful connections to student cultural, community and personal assets with art integration can increase student engagement and academic performance.

Activities for diverse learners include the following:

Modifying and Adjusting: Being thoughtful and deliberate when introducing art activities can support learners who may need additional support with language and language processing.

Consider how to simplify directions into shorter comprehensible steps using visuals and modeling. Ensure that there is ample time to complete the project in a relaxed and positive environment. Playing instrumental music in the background can enhance the ambiance and is a way to integrate another form of art.

Patterns and Stamping: Stamping is one activity that can be adapted for learners who are beginning artists. Create stamps by cutting shapes from foam that can be purchased from a craft store. Leaves with veins, such as Ginkgo, Maple, Fern, or Oak, can be used to make beautiful patterns. Implementing natural materials to create a work of art allows the learner to reimagine the items that are in their immediate environment.

### **UDL Fits with Cultural Art**

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a set of scientifically-based guidelines and principles for curriculum development that can be applied to any discipline to ensure equity and access for all learners (CAST, 2018). The three main overarching principles are multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and/or expression. This framework encourages teachers to analyze how learning varies among students to proactively plan instruction that includes flexible choices and scaffolds as opposed to retrofitting accommodations. According to the Kennedy Center (2022), the three guiding principles of UDL align with art integration. The creative process that occurs within the arts provides multiple ways students are able to represent information, demonstrate understanding, and engage in the learning process.

Activities for Implementing UDL include the following:

Activity 1: Students may demonstrate content mastery by incorporating multiple means of expression. Consider offering students the option of drawing a timeline to represent historical eras in history rather than a traditional five paragraph essay. Or allow students to create a collage as part of a pre-writing activity for creative writing.

Activity 2: Students are exposed to multiple means of representation through a cultural lens. For example, using culturally responsive works of art such as Jose Ramirez' "El Maestro" as a story prompt. Asking students to respond to the image, "What is going on in this image? Who is he teaching? What is he teaching? Where is he teaching?" Then have students create a narrative around his image, with story elements (beginning, middle, end, characters and setting). They can do an oral or written response based on student choice, multiple means of expression.

## **Conclusion: Representation Matters**

When teachers see the results of art integration demonstrated through engagement and proficiency of students, they will value the time allotted to explore and create meaningful learning opportunities for their students.

Filipino-American artist Kathy Delumpa Allegri vividly recalls how her art teacher forbade students from using black and brown colors in art lessons. At the time Crayola had a peach colored crayon called Flesh. As this color did not reflect her or her family members' brown skin tone, she left her drawings of people blank (K. Allegri, personal communication, November 4, 2021). As elementary educators, we understand that the content we teach, language we use, and learning tasks we craft have a lasting impact on the young learners in our classroom. Providing students with tools, resources, and curricula that are reflective of their culture, interests and selves is critical for creating positive learning environments that support academic achievement.

In an effort to create a space where all children are motivated to learn, teachers must be prepared to welcome students to the space where all are represented. In this work, we challenge teacher education programs to ensure that their candidates leave their schooling with the knowledge of the arts for elementary students and how to integrate culturally responsive art into their classrooms.

**Resource Page: [HUIC: Arts Education Resource Page](#)**

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