

THE A+ SCHOOLS PROGRAM: ESTABLISHING AND INTEGRATING THE ARTS AS FOUR LANGUAGES OF LEARNING

by

VINCENT MARRON

I think what we're here to do is to look at what we're talking about from many different levels of focus. So what I'm going to try to do in talking about what's been going on in the North Carolina A+ Schools Program for the last seven years is to pull the camera way back, and to take a very broad view, within which, I hope, everything else we're discussing here at this conference can fit and find its appropriate relationship.

The A+ program is described roughly as an art-based school reform effort. It was initiated in 1993 with some conversations among many people in the state of North Carolina, both within the political structure, the educational structure, and the arts structure of the state, as well as among a number of key artists. So in 1995, we began to implement this idea, which was very simple. The idea was to choose a group of schools which had put themselves forward to undertake for four years an extensive program of regular arts instruction—music, dance, drama, and visual art—for every child at least once a week from a trained, qualified arts instructor. So in effect the children were being taught four other languages for their learning: music, drama, dance, and visual art. The second phase of the program was to lead the schools over a three-year period, to integrate these art forms and these arts languages to the greatest extent possible across the curriculum.

Incidentally, people often talk about the place of the arts in schools, or about moving music into schools where it hasn't been for a while, as a curriculum issue. While in some cases I think it is a curriculum issue, in North Carolina we have what is called a standard course of study, which is a state-mandated curriculum. So in a sense we were able to separate out the issue of the curriculum—in other words *what* was taught—from another important question, which it doesn't always get separated from, which is *how* is it taught. And in our program, the *how* was the focus of the program. So the curriculum was a given; it's in the state legislation, and it is a very clear and increasingly complex and lengthy curriculum, which is one of the problems. But what we were aiming for was to demonstrate ways in which you could teach arts in an integrated fashion, using them both as subjects in their own right, with a very strong presence, but also as tools or

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instruments, if you want, for enhancing the whole of the school.

The other thing which we did from the very beginning was to take as our focus the idea that the real question was not about arts education, but ultimately about the role of the arts in our schools in North Carolina—i.e., an education question. Now that sounds like a very simple distinction, but in fact it turned out in our practice to be a very profound one, because it allowed us to determine a role for the arts in the overall *re-forming*—and I use that word with a hyphen in it—of our schools. We had many long arguments in the early days about whether this re-forming was primarily about training teachers, or about the environment of the school, or about classroom practice. And we came to the conclusion in 1995 when we were beginning this implementation that this re-forming with respect to the role of arts in the schools was really about whole school reform. And the real issue there was that in order to implement a program for whole schools, and embrace the whole school in the program from day one, we needed to have schools that were ready and willing to do it. We sought applicants for a four-year evaluation, beginning in 1995 and concluding in 1999, during which we would try to see what happened in whole schools that volunteered. The hope was that if the school undertook the arts seriously in all four disciplines for that period of time, the arts would become part of the regular life of the school in ways that those at the school hadn't imagined possible up until that point.

The reason why we took the focus on education was partly political. We pulled together a very strong advisory group to help us formulate the program in the beginning, but we realized that even though we had music teachers and visual teachers in most of our schools, and had had for as long as people could remember, they were also quite clearly still on the margins of what was important to those schools. And we were puzzled about why that was. So in effect what we were trying to do was to pull these issues together and to try to understand what happens in a school when each of the major art forms and the arts as a whole are taken really seriously as part of the business of doing school. We decided that in addition we would try to have a focus for the schools, and we developed a very simple mission statement, which simply was, "Schools that work for everyone." We meant "everyone," in five different ways: the students first, then the teachers, the parents, the administrators, and the communities in which those schools function.

Now, in North Carolina, which is one of the most rural states in this country, the school is much more than just a school. It is a focal point in the community, the engine that drives the community forward. For example, there's a school on the far western end of North Carolina on the Tennessee border. It's a pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade school, fourteen class levels under one principal with about 420 students in it—a typical school in that it had for a long time been the center of this rural community. One day the band teacher disappeared



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from the community, and simultaneously most of the band instruments disappeared from the community. So here was a school that had been functioning as the center of its community, where music was essential to what it was doing. It was also in a very poor, rural Appalachian county, and there was no way they could pull together the money to restock the instruments for the band. So one of the other music teachers in the school stepped forward with a wonderful idea, and created the very first Appalachian steel pan band, which has been touring Hawaii and the West Coast for the last two years and which this year was awarded a high school Grammy award from the Grammy foundation. In a way, it was the least likely thing that you could possibly see happening, but it did. The force of the need of that community to continue to have its music at the heart of it, and the heart of it being the school, was so strong that that

solution seemed to be self-evident to the people in the community. And you haven't heard Appalachian music until you've heard it played on a steel pan band. There are now three bands in the school: one for the high school level, which has about eighteen people in it, a middle school band, and one for the elementary school. So apparently this is going to be a tradition in that part of the world for the rest of time, as far as I can tell.

The twenty-five schools were selected to be as representative as possible of the state public schools. However, they were also selected because they stepped forward and volunteered for the program and because they committed to staying in it for four years. After four years in the program, we still as of this

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day have twenty-three of those twenty-five original schools very active in the program, which is far more than we expected. In addition, we have taken on twelve new schools in the last three years, and there are more schools coming into the program every year. We probably are working now with between 1300 and 1400 schoolteachers in the course of every year; and because the schools have stayed in the program over an extended period of time, those teachers are the same teachers. Obviously there is turnover, but not that great. Where the turnover has been strong is in the principals. Only four of the original principals are still left, and several schools have changed principals two or three times over the five years. It doesn't seem to make any difference, which is something that really baffles our researchers. They're still trying to figure it out.

The schools taken into the program have to undergo a very extensive planning period that takes eighteen months. This is a way of making sure that a school is coming into this program with a reasonable consensus among its faculty. I think it is unrealistic to expect a school to undertake a program which is as strong as this in the arts and as integrated as this in the form of instruction, without having at least what our researchers refer to as "strong preexisting sentiments" in this direction.

But this was precisely what has strengthened the program year to year: a continuous program of professional development based upon the idea that the competence to do

this work lay within the schools already—that the teachers in those schools, the specialist teachers in the arts, as well as the regular classroom teachers, had within them to competence to do this work from within the schools. Our job was to try and provide the conditions which would allow that capacity to develop. To make this truly a whole school effort, we were determined from the very beginning that we would require schools who wanted to move into this program to come for a five-day residential institute as soon as they were ready for it. This has been the hallmark of the program ever since. The schools were invited to bring everybody they thought was important in the lives of the children to the residential program, which would not only lead them through the process of becoming familiar with what the arts are and can do, but also would teach them some of the pedagogical approaches to arts integration. The schools brought the classroom teachers, obviously, and principals and the teaching assistants; but some also brought the janitor, and some brought the school secretary. Others also brought their favorite artists from their own community. And they spent a whole five days together - often the first time they'd ever spent - that amount of time together - taking dance classes, taking music classes and learning the rudiments of the program.

Then, in order to sustain the program over the years, what we have been able to do is to turn what was originally a program of 35 schools into a network 35 very different programs, all of which have accepted the

following basic ideas: *teach children the arts at least once a day; rotate through four disciplines a week so that the children are learning the four different languages of music, art, drama, and dance, as a pattern in their lives; integrate the arts over a three to four-year period as much as possible into the classroom teachers' work, and vice versa.* This integration is sometimes thought of as a one-way street, but in practice it's a two-way dialogue, which grows over time.

These networks have gone from very primitive connecting mechanisms—at the summer institutes, in regional workshops through the year—and have become an ongoing, continuous conversation. For example, the principals who are scattered all over the state have developed an open discussion forum on the Internet. There is another network of all the 1300 teachers in the program and another for the coordinators in each school who are the liaison to the network. And finally, there's one network for a group of very special people called the A+ Fellows, who are teachers who teach teachers.

We have also undertaken over these four years a very extensive evaluation program. We looked around the country and invited proposals from a number of places, and we ended up choosing as our evaluators a group composed of two researchers from Philadelphia and one from North Carolina. We chose them because of their backgrounds in anthropology and sociology. They proposed to undertake the review of the program by taking an ethnographic approach to the

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whole question of what was going on in these schools and why.

As a result, the researchers collected lots of interesting stories. One of my favorite stories was about the time where they went into one school where there was an elderly lady volunteering. They decided that they wanted to interview her, because they would talk to anybody to find out what was going on. It turned out she was the grandmother of a 4th grader in this school, so they asked her what she thought about the program, and she said, Well, she was unconvinced about all this arts stuff, until one day she was babysitting for her granddaughter, and when her daughter came home, she got into a conversation with the granddaughter. And the grandmother overheard the daughter say to the granddaughter, "If you don't clean your room tonight, you are not going to school tomorrow." She thought that was pretty clear evidence that something important was going on.

The results of this extensive evaluation are published in a set of seven policy reports, together with a separate executive summary¹. For researchers wishing to pursue additional inquiry, the data from this evaluation is also available on CD from the Kenan Institute in North Carolina. It is our hope that what is published so far will lead to further exploration by others.

Here for example are four possible areas of future inquiry:

- The A+ evaluation articulated with many examples how the presence of the arts effected deep change in school culture, how in the most developed examples the arts led to a permanent change in the schools' own identity.
- The A+ evaluation demonstrated and described a process of school re-form that went far beyond generalized notions such as aggregate test results in documenting the "added value" that the arts and arts integration bring to a school.
- The A+ evaluation reported results from surveys of teachers. In one question teachers were asked to identify which of five categories of student was best served by this A+ approach to teaching and learning. The five categories were: special needs children, low, average and high performers, and gifted and talented. The teacher response was that this A+ approach served all five categories of children equally successfully.
- The A+ evaluation explored the resilience of A+ schools and teachers in the face of challenges such as high stakes testing. One reviewer, writing in "Critical Links", referred to how schools developed the capacity to man-

HOWEVER, THE RESEARCH IS VERY CLEAR ABOUT THE FACT THAT WHAT MAKES SCHOOLS REALLY FUNCTION AS ORGANIZATIONS IS THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERNAL CAPACITY OF THE SCHOOL, THE INTERNAL STRENGTH OF THE SCHOOL. IT IS HERE, I THINK, THAT THE ARTS CAN BE VERY POWERFUL, AND VERY, VERY DELIBERATE IN THEIR CONTRIBUTION.

age such outside forces. The A+ model suggests that schools be required to invent their methods of change because it is the process of developing and implementing these methods that evokes a change of school culture. External resources exist to support, rather than to prescribe, the methods.

I would also like to say a few words about the context in which we work today, and this is particularly true in large cities, but it is also true even in the most rural areas. The speed of change is increasing. We can only imagine what it is going to be like for the children who are in the first

grade now, moving through to the year 2012. I heard the chairman of Sisco Systems giving a graduation talk at Wake Forest University this year, and he pointed out that 80% of the jobs that people will be doing ten years from now to earn a living, in his opinion, haven't even been conceptualized at this point. I also had the pleasure of spending some time with Ken Robinson, a fellow Englishman, who pointed out that we've taken a shift in the last few years, in the last 25 years certainly, from having 80% of our work in the manufacturing and agricultural area and 20% in information sciences and information practice, to just the opposite, so that less than 20% of the available work in the world now lies outside of the area of information.

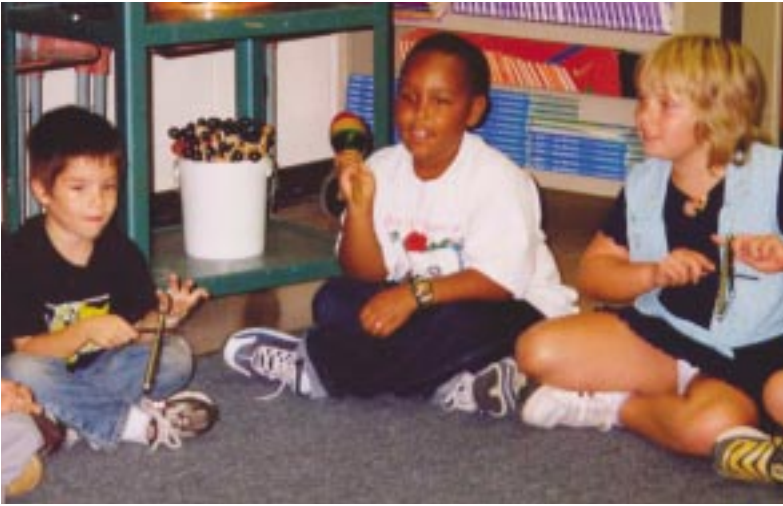
The other context which we're working in, and I think our teachers are working in, and our schools are working in, has to do with the work that has been developing in the last ten years—fifteen in the case of Howard Gardner—around multiple intelligence theory and its impact on the way teachers are thinking. This work has had profound impacts, and continues to do so, as you know. Of course, parallel to that is the work on brain research. All of those contexts are continually informing what we're doing, and hopefully informing what teachers are doing.

What I don't hear talked about, and which comes up in our context quite a lot, is the beginning of a reflection which doesn't usually emerge from political fields, but more from philosophical and edu-

cational fields: some really deep conversations and questions about what education is for anyway. I'm taken back to a quote which I've seen in the writings of Yeats, as well as in Jung's writings on child development, and it goes something like this: "Education is not about filling a jug, but about lighting a fire." Now, I'm not given to either/ors very much, and I think maybe both of those are part of the puzzle here. But this contrast in approach does indicate two very different attitudes to what we're doing in schools. The contrast is also reflected in the persistent position—and this is where assessment and standardized tests hit us hard—about student outcomes in our schools. Are the students there to absorb knowledge, or are they there to construct meaning for their lives?

Howard Gardner, in one of his recent books, last year, put his cards on the table about education in a way that I hadn't seen him do before. He said that in his opinion education was really about developing an enhanced understanding in each student of five different worlds that we live in: the physical world, the biological world, the world of human beings, the world of human artifacts, and the world of self. We find that a very helpful framework in which to discuss education, particularly with people outside of education.

Let me end by just saying a couple more things about the specific concerns funders have about education. The Keenan Institute is in a peculiar way a grant-making, or at



The Kenan Institute requires that public schools employ music, dance, theater, and visual art as four languages of learning in all of its A+ School programs currently in North Carolina, Oklahoma, Arkansas, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

least an investing, organization. We invest in major ventures, some of our own doing and some of other people's doing. Some of the major concerns about education which I hear among funders can be summarized in the following questions:

- How can we narrow or even close the performance gap between minorities and white students?
- How can we engage students in learning?
- How can we engage students in understanding what it means to build community?
- How can we face and support the need for higher order thinking skills related to the new economy?

- How can we improve the quality of teachers and teaching practice?

Now what I would suggest to you is that when the proponents of the arts in general, and music in particular, can come forward and state how they can contribute to the resolution of these issues, they will be heard. In North Carolina, our program has played down to some extent the emphasis on the arts as part of what we are doing. Not that the arts are not there very strongly, but in terms of talking to the world, our main focus has been to talk about the richness that comes to a school when it has a strong portfolio of art programs—the richness that comes to a school when it is integrating the arts into its everyday work, as well as making sure

that the arts are taught at strength in all of the disciplines.

The final thing I just want to touch on is a realization relating to my institute and also to other organizations that are in a similar position. Whether we like it or not, schools are organizations. Schools are organizations of human beings seeking a common purpose, and if we ignore that fact, we run the risk of overlooking all of the pathologies which can affect the health of organizations. Schools are organizations in themselves, and as part of that we need to understand what it means for a school to develop its own capacity to be strong in what it does. One of the puzzles about the issues of assessment and accountability—which are the very strong and loud words which we hear every day, in the educational world—is external accountability, the forces that put pressure on schools. In our state these are very high stakes; schools and teachers are rewarded with bonuses, which I prefer to call bribes, and what happens is the external accountability debilitates the capacity of a school to ever develop its own internal capacity.

However, the research is very clear about the fact that what makes schools really function as organizations is the development of the internal capacity of the school, the internal strength of the school. It is here, I think, that the arts can be very powerful, and very, very deliberate in their contribution.¶

¹ See references at the end of this article.

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