Disruptive Teaching: Elementary School Teachers as Intellectual Risk-Takers

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Abstract

Standards-driven reform shaped the latter part of the last century. As a result, elementary schools in the United States typically center on content and assessment-focused measurable outcomes. This compels schools and the teachers within them to be constrained by and focused on standardized assessment (almost exclusively Language Arts and Mathematics) and curriculum aligned with content standards. In addition, many teacher preparation programs are guided by this same environment and steer new teachers toward best practices in plan-instruct-assess-reteach models aimed at meeting their own standards in the teaching profession. This is in direct contrast to what the current research suggests: that schools have killed creativity and the ability to 'think'. We propose that teachers challenge this trend and suggest that educational systems move toward fostering creative agency in schools and the larger society.

This paper is informed by this creative agency and advocates that teachers can accomplish the goals of this standards-driven environment, all while becoming intellectual risk-takers. We recommend that teachers become intellectual risk-takers by rethinking standardized content through revolutionary, disruptive, and authentic practice by interrogating curriculum and even developing their own. While many possible entry points to this disruptive practice, we suggest teachers can have the creative confidence to address targeted populations (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Queer, plus [LGBTQ+], English Language Learners [ELL]), promote culturally responsive practices, and implement content beyond English language arts and math (visual and performing arts) in innovative ways that better meet the needs of 21st Century students.

Keywords: Curriculum Development, integrated arts, ELL, LGBTQ+

Standards-driven reform shaped the latter part of the last century and continues to be the driving force behind student assessment, teacher accountability, and curriculum implementation (Cassata & Allensworth, 2021; Klenkowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2010; Schwabasky, 2018; Sutherland, 2022; Weiss et al., 2022). As a result, elementary schools in the United States typically center on the delivery of content and implementation of assessment-focused measurable outcomes (Fitz & Lee, 2000; Manatt, 1995; Taylor & Nolen, 2022). This focus on assessment, outcomes, and standards-driven content, rather than the education of the whole person, socio- emotional learning, or ideological or philosophical positioning of the student as central to learning, compels schools and the teachers within them to be constrained by and focused on standardized assessment (almost exclusively in Language Arts and Mathematics, see Saez et al., 2021). As a result, this limits any presentation of curriculum to content that is explicitly and solely aligned with the language contained in content standards. Absent an innovative administrator and often with little motivation or encouragement to act autonomously themselves, many elementary school teachers have been left to become little more than Disney-like animatronics responsible for adherence to teachers' manuals, scripted curriculum, and proverbially 'teaching to the test.'

In the United States, this notion of creative agency for teachers is further complicated by the sociopolitical climate impacting education, particularly in the last decade. For instance, in spite of decades of research demonstrating anti-gay bullying being responsible for suicidal ideation, impacts on achievement, and continuation rates (Fast, 2016; MacGillivray & Jennings, 2008; Pollack & Shuster, 2000; Rivers, 1995), a raft of anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) legislation regarding schools, curriculum, and teachers has either been proposed or enacted in at least 23 states in the last five years (Carter, 2022; Gillespie, 2018; Kitzmiller, 2018; Minnich, 2022). Philosophical and ideological conceptual frameworks like Critical Race Theory (CRT) have been attacked, mis/appropriated, and mis/understood across a variety of educational contexts (Compton-Lilly, 2020; Galligan & Miller, 2022; Hartman & Machado, 2019; Mensah, 2019). Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy (CRSP) (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris, 2012; Taylor & Nolen, 2022) is at once both a goal of many, but a pariah for some. Beyond conceptual or theoretical ideology, very specific, granular decisions are being made about what can be taught and who can be the intended recipient(s) of that teaching. For instance, although approved by the College Board, recently the Florida Department of Education has rejected the inclusion of an Advanced Placement (AP) African American Studies class (Meckler, 2023) for Florida's high schools. Teachers are caught in the middle of discourse, political ideology, and best practice from any number of topics and sectors ranging from dyslexia (Wroth et al., 2018) to teachers unions (Superfine et al., 2018) to teacher preparation requirements (Dwyer et al., 2020) to teacher evaluation (Bleiberg & Harbatkin, 2020). Teachers are stifled, at best, and disincentivized to do anything outside a version of a 'stand-and-deliver' model of a standards-driven curriculum informed by assessment-driven outcomes.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2023) defines 'teacher' as, "one whose occupation is to instruct". This is nebulous at best. Teachers instruct, certainly. But elementary teachers make over 1500 decisions in an eight-hour school day (roughly one independent decision every 20 seconds) and given the advanced use of more and more technologies, the total number of decisions is likely even higher than that (Klein, 2021). But teachers, elementary teachers particularly, also decide on how to manage, engage, nurse, serve as psychologist, implement, plan, assess, communicate (with students, parents, fellow teachers, administrators), and much more in a given day, week, month, or school year. Teachers make both data-driven and intuition-based decisions (Vanlommel et al., 2017), emotion-driven decisions (Benesch, 2018), decisions based on assessment outcomes (Anderson, 2003), as well as instructional and curricular decisions (Boschman et al., 2014; Harris, 2021). It is these latter decisions we turn our attention to in this paper. In a standards-driven, outcomes-based climate and over-arching educational context, we encourage teachers to maintain autonomous, informed decision-making about how, what, and when to teach their students the required content.

This paper is informed by the notion of creative agency and advocates that teachers can accomplish the goals of this standards-driven environment, all while becoming intellectual risk-takers (Beghetto et al., 2021; Clark & Soutter, 2022). We recommend that teachers become intellectual risk-takers by rethinking standardized content through revolutionary, disruptive, and authentic practice (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Cohen, 2017; Theobald, 2001) by interrogating curriculum and even developing their own. While there are many possible entry points to this disruptive practice, we suggest teachers can have the creative confidence to promote culturally responsive practices at three possible starting points: by addressing targeted populations (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Queer, plus [LGBTQ+], and English Language Learners [ELL]) and implementing content beyond English Language Arts (ELA) and math by intentional integration of the visual and performing arts (see Blute, 2019) in innovative ways that better meet the needs of 21st Century students. If teachers are 'those who instruct' we are encouraging them to decide on how best to do that.

Standardized Curriculum

The benevolent nature and most significant advantage of the United States' public school system is the degree of student autonomy it provides. In the United States, all fifty states, including the major cities with the largest urban school districts, set their own curriculum frameworks, priorities, funding, and scheduling (Lezotte, 2011; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017). America's Department of Education guides, recommends, and sets national standards, but has no direct power over state or local authority when it comes to enforcing what should be included in the instructional design (Labaree, 1997; Lury, 2016). Therefore, standards may vary between states and districts, with some having distressing differences. By reason of the 10th amendment, education is a function of the state. It is by the state governments that responsibilities pertaining to the inner workings and operations of public education are decided (Lynch et al., 2016; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017). However, if the state

government's focus is mostly concentrated on the state-assessed subjects (English language Arts [ELA] and math), the curriculum in question has the potential to perpetuate inequalities in schools. On one hand, standardized curriculum supports some level of equity by ensuring all students have access to the comprehensive educational package (Johnson & Arnold, 2007; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2017). Additionally, newer standardized curriculum has developed a sort of teacher-proofing mechanism through scripted curriculum. Teachers, and especially those new to the field, are able to read from a script and ensure learning activities are cohesively taught (Young, 2013; Sparapani & Perez, 2015). Nonetheless, standardizing curriculum severely limits the opportunities for all students to learn by enforcing a 'one-size-fits all' mentality (Au, 2011; 2020).

Through investigation of the social sciences, it is evident that social inequality continues to be sustained through the widespread use of standardized curriculum. One major aspect of standardized curriculum is that it fits in the social theoretical perspective of functionalism. According to Ballantine and Hammack (2009) the goal of education is to socialize, integrate, find social placement, and create social and cultural innovation. This theory of socialization states that education serves to fulfill the needs of society. In terms of proper socialization, this theory states that all children should learn the same set of rules, morals, customs, and traditions in order to properly socialize in society (Au, 2011; Ballantine & Hammock, 2009; Noddings, 2013). However, these often differ from the values and customs of other cultures and students from different countries (Ladson-BIllings, 2021). Educators and policy makers must think about what would happen to students if they are not exposed to teachers presenting content in unique and creative ways and are only teaching them what the curriculum demands them to teach. Does this imply that all students should conform to the values and beliefs of American customs and rebel against their own? This outdated way of thinking does not benefit all children. In the standardized view, learning American customs and traditions is argued to be a safe-guard for students from different backgrounds so as to properly assimilate with American society. On the contrary, socialists would argue that the traditions of other cultures need to be shared, appreciated, honored, and prominent in the
curriculum since it is they who make up larger portions of the student populations in our educational systems (Au, 2011; Hopkins, 2019). Additionally, through the expansion of globalization, all cultures benefit from learning about the customs and traditions around the world so as to better socialize and experience interconnectedness (Gay, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Lury, 2016)

Given what we know about the importance, necessity, and reality of elementary teachers making decisions for their classrooms and students, perhaps the most optimal place for teacher decision making is in the area of what gets taught, how it gets delivered, and who is/should be the target audience. There are a certain set of assumptions here: 1) (public school) teachers have been handed an adopted curriculum, 2) an administrator (or even Lead Teacher or grade level chair) has provided some kind of curricular or instructional vision or guidance for the school/grade writ large, and 3) all students should receive all content, even if developmentally differentiated to target specific student needs. Even if some amalgam of

those assumptions is true, let us trust that a teacher has been hired to teach a particular grade or content and has received even a modicum of direction on what and how to teach it (after all, a teacher is one whose occupation is to instruct). As we learned above, it is unlikely that there is a high degree of oversight or direct evaluation of this teacher (Bleiberg & Harbatkin, 2020) beyond the collection of student performance on standardized assessment outcomes. Absent a rigidly-monitored scripted curriculum, ultimately most teachers have a high degree of autonomy, if they choose to accept it, to decide what and how to teach within the four walls of their classroom.

In practice, there is a reality of this decision-making possibility. Knowing that some amount of instructional choices and decisions are being made, we advocate for teachers to be revolutionary and disruptive in their decisions surrounding curriculum and to move away from a scripted, dogmatic adherence to the potentially limiting language of standards. This move should be toward a more intentional delivery of content under the umbrella of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy (CRSP). Implement standards, yes; but use the language of standards through the lens of CRSP. We suggest three possible entry points to begin, two that focus on misunderstood or ignored targeted populations: English Language Learners (ELLs) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, plus (LGBTQ+), and one by integrating an often-ignored area of content: visual and performing arts.

Why Disrupt by addressing ELL and Emergent Bilingual students/content?

The merits of culturally responsive teaching, especially for students learning English as a second language, have been touted for decades (Au, 2011; Banks 1993; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Muhammad, 2020; Paris, 2012), and yet public schools in the United States continue to force teachers to deliver instruction contained within standardized curriculum and to use standardized assessments in order to secure public school funding (Au, 2011). As the number of students learning English in public schools in the United States increases exponentially every year, the negative impact of standardized curriculum and the need for creative teaching has never been more evident. But this is not a situation singular to the U.S. With over 39% of the world's countries requiring English as their official language, either mandated by law or stated unofficially, it is not surprising that there are approximately 1.5 billion English language learners worldwide (Gration, 2022). In 2020 alone, over 6.3 million immigrant students arrived in schools in the United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, Canada, France, China, and the United States (Gration, 2022). The abysmal standardized testing scores and the frustration of teachers supporting students learning English as a second language tells us that our approach to teaching English as a second language has failed both teachers and students. It is clear that success with acquiring English as a second language requires an approach that addresses both language acquisition and the specific social emotional learning needs that cannot be found in standardized curriculum, needs that are best addressed by a creative, compassionate, risk-taking teacher.

As the number of students learning English as a second language increases, their performance on standardized assessments remains significantly lower than the scores of their native English-speaking classmates. In California, for example, only 13% of students learning English as a second language met or exceeded standards on the English Language

Arts state standardized assessment while 55% of students proficient in English met or exceeded the standards on the same assessment (California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, 2021). The reason for this can be largely attributed to the design of the standardized curriculum and assessments and its "one-size-fits-all" approach (Escamilla et al., 2022).

In 2001, the United States passed legislation that dedicated $1 billion dollars annually to solve the perceived literacy crisis in the country. This funding provided by the Reading First Initiative was tied to student performance on standardized assessments and could be used toward such things as professional development for teachers, school restructuring, and resources for monitoring implementation of the standardized curriculum (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002). Informing the government's commitment to standardized curriculum and assessment in the area of literacy were the findings from the research of the National Reading Panel which emphasized the instruction of foundational reading skills such as phonics, phonological awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Over time, literacy instruction developed a laser focus on phonological awareness and phonics as the way to bridge all students, native and non-native English speakers alike, with proficiency in English literacy skills. Called the "Science of Reading," proponents claimed that this approach, backed by the findings of the National Reading Panel, was based in brain science (Escamilla et al., 2022). In 2008, the Institute of National Research conducted a study to determine the impact of the Reading First Initiative and found no statistically significant increase in early student literacy, there was no impact on student motivation to engage in reading, as well (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

Beyond Foundational Reading Skills

One would think that focused instruction in the fundamental aspects of a language such as sounds, letters, blending, and decoding would boost the proficiency of non-native speakers. As it turns out, the 2001 study conducted by the National Reading Panel failed to include students learning English as a second language in their research groups, and therefore failed to uncover the specific learning needs of this particular group of students. A 2006 study by the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth focused on the literacy needs specific to English language learners. It was not surprising that they found instruction focused on foundational literacy skills alone was not sufficient for English language learners (August & Shanahan, 2006). Although foundational literacy skills have been found to be beneficial for learning English, they do not address other fundamental needs for students learning a new language.

The first additional need identified by the study is the significant role of the student's home language (August & Shanahan, 2006). The study found that the bilingual brain learns language in a different way than a monolingual brain. A bilingual brain, whether it is proficient in the home language or not, does best when the new language intersects with the home language in intentional ways (Escamilla et al., 2022). In addition to finding the intersections between English and the home language, research describes the benefits of providing students strategic opportunities to use their home language during instruction

(Calderon et al., 2011). There is no standardized English language arts curriculum that supports teachers in providing this intersection for their students who are learning English as a second language, nor does standardized curriculum provide strategic opportunities for students to use their home language during instruction. The de facto message communicated by the school, and consistently reinforced by the standardized curriculum and testing, is that the students' home language is secondary to becoming proficient in English (Paris, 2012). Teachers must determine disruptive ways of including home language in instruction.

Meaning making is another essential component for second language acquisition (August & Shanahan, 2006). When students construct meaning, they draw upon several tools to support them with this process. Students learn best when they can utilize schema to make connections between what they already know and the new learning (Lombardi, 2008). For students acquiring English, many of whom are either newcomers or from immigrant households, drawing upon background knowledge and what they understand about their own identities is essential for building meaning within the context of the new language (Cummins et al., 2015). When linguistically and culturally diverse students do not see themselves reflected in their learning materials, building meaning for themselves and connecting the new learning to what they already know becomes a fruitless task (Muhammad, 2020, Calderon et al., 2011). Not only is there a lack of representation for linguistically and culturally diverse students in the standardized curriculum, standardized curriculum often portrays the characters and figures from their cultures, as victims or in negative circumstances (Cummins et al., 2015, Muhammad, 2020). It is clear that disruptive teachers need to provide multiple modalities to actively generate meaning through identity affirming texts, and when students are positioned as powerful communicators, engagement and achievement for linguistically and culturally diverse students increases.

Another necessary component of English language acquisition that is often overlooked is oracy. Oracy encompasses much more than just giving students space to talk to each other. Oracy involves both listening and speaking and requires the use of both content vocabulary and academic language (Wilkinson, 1968, Escamilla et al., 2022). While standardized curriculum provides lists of vocabulary words for students to learn, it takes a creative teacher to scaffold learning for English learners so that they are able to begin to weave the terms together with the academic language that makes their command of English more nuanced. It is the lack of movement from Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) that keeps English learners from testing proficient in English (Cummins, 2001). Cummins (2001) describes BICS as the speech students learning English might use in informal conversations with friends. This is typically the language that comes earlier for the student. CALP, on the other hand, is defined as the formal language used in academic conversations that uses vocabulary particular to a discipline, as well as the academic language that holds the vocabulary and terminology together (Cummins, 2001). This is why it is imperative that English learners not only learn rich content vocabulary, but are also given many opportunities to engage in conversations where they can practice using the vocabulary terms in academic discourse (Escamilla et al., 2022).

Teacher Creativity and English Language Learners

Standardized curriculum not only omits the identities of linguistically and culturally diverse students, but the teacher's identity as a skilled creator and assessor of student learning (McNeil, 1986). Worse than that, the promotion of standardized curriculum and assessment practices, with its emphasis on foundational literacy, skews the way teachers and administrators define what it means to be proficient in English (Pacheco, 2010). Teachers and administrators in Pacheco's (2010) study claimed that success in English language arts was the goal for all students, but when asked how they planned to connect all students at their schools with that goal, their plans did not provide differentiated instruction for native versus non-native English-speaking students. This may be attributed to the fact that the guides provided teachers for informing them what and how to teach both promoted phonics and phonological awareness, and failed to inform teachers about differentiated instruction for their English learners (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005).

Our new generation of teachers, many of whom are people of color and former English language learners, recognize the lack of representation in their standardized curriculum and are demanding more for their linguistically and culturally diverse students. These teachers, some of whom are at school sites with administrators who mandate that all teachers in each grade level are on the same page in their teacher's edition on the same day, reading the same script, quietly close their classroom doors and bring in multimodal texts with characters that look and sound like the diverse students in their classrooms. These rebel teachers who reject the standardized curriculum and resort to deceptive teaching practices (Au, 2011), many times at the risk of being reprimanded or even fired by school administrators and leaders, do so because they inherently know that standardized curriculum does not provide the rich, comprehensive English language experience that their students need. We know what English language learners need to succeed. The research is abundant. It's time to open our classroom doors and take back instruction for all students.

Why Disrupt by addressing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, + (LGBTQ+) students/content?

To truly transform the landscape of education where children's true selves can grow and schools reflect what is happening in the world (Goodman, Kuzmic, & Wu, 1992), curriculum design must be developed including the theoretical framework known as Queer Theory. Defined by Block (2020), teaching queerly is using curriculum that embodies fluid and authentic lesson plans, objectives, and standards that challenge thinking that categorizes people and demands exploring taken-for-granted assumptions about diversity (Letts & Sears, 1999). Moreover, sexuality- and gender-inclusive curriculum must use affirming language that has no bias and does not normalize a binary in gender expression in children or solely a heteronormative narrative (Surtees, 2005). Since schools often teach both values and content that is never openly discussed or acknowledged (Apple, 1990), sexuality- and gender-inclusive curriculum must also have LGBTQ content concretely and intentionally built into lessons so that students and teachers alike can acknowledge the struggles of gender minority youth and hopefully empathize (Blackburn, 2005). The following section will highlight how discipline-specific curriculum can be developed and implemented so the binary is dismantled,

heteronormative norms are disrupted, and affirming and inclusive spaces are created for all learners in the multiple disciplines of an elementary classroom.

Inclusive Social Studies

Social studies education notes that students must "begin to interact with other students, some of whom are like the student and some are different" (National Council for Social Studies, 1994, p. 21). The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework highlights the importance of social studies helping students know the past and act in ways that promote the common good as well as asks students to learn about significant events and different individuals and groups from the past. Yet, according to Snapp, McGuire, Sinclair, Gabrion, and Russell (2015) almost 75% of students who participated in the 2008 Preventing School Harassment Survey stated there was a lack of visibility of LGBTQ+ content in social studies. Camicia and Zhu (2019) posit that when standards do not explicitly require inclusion of LGBTQ+ content, it creates the context for exclusionary and undemocratic curriculum design. Thus, the social studies curriculum is a necessary piece in creating a more accurate reading of the world in which students live their lives today (Maguth & Taylor, 2014). Sheppard and Mayo (2013) argue it is the job of the social studies curriculum to shed light on the assumptions that embody American beliefs about gender and sexuality.

To create inclusive social studies education, educators must use a dynamic, multi-faceted approach that provides students permission to learn from historic figures, events, movements, and lets LGBTQ-identified students know they are not alone (Maguth & Taylor, 2014). However, according to Loutzenheiser (2006) this cannot be an "Add and Stir Method" that simply layers LGBTQ+ content on pre-existing topics, but must be done in a manner with thoughtful pedagogy that shifts essential questions and analyses. Inclusive curriculum must tell LGBTQ+ students the truth about both the historic and current struggle for LBGTQ+ rights (Maguth & Taylor, 2014). For example, when social movements are discussed, The LGBTQ+ Movement and the difficulties Harvey Milk experienced could be analyzed (Snapp et al., 2015). Block (2020) suggests that when teaching European history, students could examine Single Party Rulers, genocide of LGBTQ+ humans, or past and present rulers with LGBTQ+ relationships. When LGBTQ+ students, as well as any other marginalized group, feels more represented in classrooms, they are considerably more likely to have a stronger sense of well-being as well as higher achievement (Snapp et al., 2015)

Inclusive Science

In today's world, scientists are well-respected, well liked, and believed to be a key to the continued economic prosperity and quality of life in our country (Miller, 2004; PEW Research Center, 2009). Scientific data is rarely up for debate or open to interpretation. If science is the ruling agency for facts, school, or more specifically science curriculum, is often the mechanism by which these immutable "facts" are delivered and ultimately cemented. But, at present the social sciences and the hard sciences are in discord with one another, making the presentation of these "facts" to literal-minded children very difficult. For example, uninformative and stigmatizing sex education curriculum commonly discusses sexually transmitted infections (STI) only as they relate to heterosexuals and cisgender couples silencing the experience of gender minorities (Gowen & Winges-Yanez, 2014; Hobaica,

Schofield, & Kwon, 2017). Furthermore, discussions around sex-safe sexual health, and various forms of sexual pleasure are taught through a cisgender lens. There is rarely any discussion on the sexual experience of homosexual or transgender students and sexual resources are narrowly focused on norms and neglect to highlight opportunities to learn more about transition (Haley, Tordoff, Kantor, Crouch, & Ahrens, 2019; Hobaica et al., 2019; Kosciw et al., 2018).

Life science often reinforces both a binary gender system as well as gender stereotypes. For example, when teachers are instructing about mammalian fertilization, they often demonstrate the egg as a passive participant in the process while highlighting the active role of the sperm. While unintentional, this subtle message reinforces the idea that women's roles are also passive (Norton, 2009). Further illustrating this point, students often learn that males produce sperm and females produce eggs instead of the more inclusive language that states testes produce sperm and ovaries produce eggs (Long et al., n.d.). When topics such as pregnancy are discussed, rarely does instruction include any discussion of surrogacy or other forms of pregnancy (Gowen & Winges-Yanez, 2014; Hobaica, et al., 2019). Life science can also be exclusionary when there is any discussion of gene distribution. Many educators will explain to students that one set of genes comes from mom and the other set from dad instead of stating that you get a mixed set of genes from the sperm and the egg (Long et al., n.d.). As a result, science educators very often create strict boundaries around gender. However, when science educators eliminate the strict boundaries and dichotomization of gender by using more accurate curriculum, they create more inclusive classrooms. For example, instead of teaching the more binary aspects of the natural world, educators could highlight the incredible non-binary life that occupies it. In her 2013 book, *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*, Joan Roughgarden discusses many insects that blend the binary as males and females and look exactly the same. To further illustrate her point that the natural world is filled with non-binary life, Roughgarden (2013) describes reptiles whose sex is determined by their environment; hamlet fish and barnacles who are both hermaphrodites, and the clownfish who is born male but has the ability to switch permanently to female during life. When educators work to repair damaged or incorrect scientific knowledge that reinforces a binary gender system, they begin to create a space where gender minorities feel included (Gunckel, 2019).

Sex education curriculum reform would also create space for transgender students. A lack of comprehensive sex education curriculum is keeping children's curiosity controlled and their sexuality managed, thus, educational leaders must bring gender and sexuality back into the curriculum in concrete ways rather than an unstated, de facto presence. For example, when students are observing life forms, curriculum should avoid guiding inquiry (i.e. what do you notice about how fast the life form is going?, What color is the life form?, etc.) and invite students to make whatever observations they would like. Students should have permission to inquire about sex, sexuality, or gender (Gunckel, 2019). A comprehensive inclusive sexual education curriculum must include explanations of scientific processes such as organ functionality and hormone treatments (Haley et al., 2019; Long et al., n.d.). Developmentally appropriate inclusive sexual education curriculum should also include discussion of non-

medical gender affirming interventions such as standing to pee devices, tucking, and bras that empower gender minorities; as well as resources and discussion about medical intervention such as pubertal blockers. Moreover, inclusive sexual education curriculum should include STI prevention, and contraception and fertility issues and language specific to gender minorities (Haley et al., 2019; Hobaica, Schofield, & Kwon, 2019).

Why Disrupt with the Visual-Performing Arts?

With the emphasis on current educational mandates to teach basic skills, teachers are unable to be creative in decision making and teaching the content. One possible solution is to integrate the visual-performing arts into the core curriculum to engage and to offer alternative avenues for learning. Teachers have the opportunity to engage in new ways of thinking and processes that are unique to the arts. In using these arts' habits of mind, there is an opportunity for students to access core concepts and skills of the content areas in multiple ways (Fiske, 1999; Gullat, 2008; Lloyd, 2017; Mishook & Kornhaber, 2006). To integrate the arts, to move beyond standardized content like English language arts (ELA) and mathematics as a single focus, is an act of disruption.

This integration has real, tangible, and measurable benefits, beyond the explicit content contained in a standard in ELA or math. For instance, forming mental images prior to creation is a skill that is used in both mathematics or writing. It also helps with problem solving, to be able to visualize an outcome before it is tried. Integrating the arts moves students beyond content and toward creating. The visual-performing arts include skills such as using visual-spatial ability, self-critique, trial and error, persistence, and reflection (Winner & Hetland, 2008) – skills at the very heart of forming mental images. These are life skills needed to be successful in a career, not simply skills valued by artists and educators. Winner and Hetland studied students who were enrolled in public schools with strong arts programs. They found that there were many "habits of mind" of artists, similar to forming mental images, that are transferable to everyday life (2008, p. 30). Students who created visual art had the habit of visualizing their product before creating it.

Arts production often has a physicality to it that traditional methods such as reading, writing, and calculating do not. The arts provide an alternative way to express ideas and learning. In several studies, students created art products that showed their learning about a concept in core subjects (Gullat, 2007, 2008; Seashore, Anderson, & Riedel, 2003). Students were able to use various modalities, kinesthetic, visual, and auditory to show what they understood in content. Using the body, there is more use of critical thinking to communicate ideas and in turn, more retention of those ideas (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999; Mason, Steedly, & Thormann, 2008).

Students who created art had habits of persistence. Trial and error are a useful strategy in mathematical problem solving, writing, and experimentation. Students who are involved in the arts reflected on the process of creating as well as the product itself. They used internal and external criteria to examine what they created and made adjustments (Lloyd, 2017; Winner & Hetland, 2008). In addition, the transfer of processes from arts content to core subjects can assist students in reinforcing habits of mind in all areas.

Arts Integration

There are many ways to define arts integration and several definitions have been offered in the literature. Scholars and practitioners do agree that integrating the visual performing arts is a multi-step process and can be defined into several categories. But for this article, we will use the Kennedy Center's widely accepted definition: "Arts Integration is an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both" (Silverstein & Layne, 2010, p.1). Arts integration is taking one of the five arts (visual arts, music, dance, theater, or media arts) and fully integrating concepts and skills along with the chosen core subject.

Teachers choosing to use integration to infuse more creativity, choice, context into core subjects for all populations have several integration models to select. There are many ways to label these models. Some common descriptions are arts infusion, interdisciplinary, and thematic. But the research literature has three integrative models that transcend many of the labels: the subservient approach, the affective or holistic model, and the co-equal cognitive integration style. The subservient approach is using the arts as a vehicle to teach content such as social studies, language arts, science, and mathematics concepts. It is the most common and least integrative model with the visual-performing arts. The main purpose and focus are to teach the content disciplines and "spice up" this curriculum to make it more interesting or accessible (Bresler, 1995). Sometimes the use of the arts creates motivation for learning the content because it is another way to engage students with multiple entry points such as visual, kinesthetic, and auditory pathways. The subservient approach is popular because it saves time. Teachers can plan the core subject and align an artform that supports that content or skill.

The most encompassing model of integration is the co-equal cognitive model (Bresler, 1995). The research literature in arts education and policy advocate this approach. The model is designed to provide both content area and visual-performing arts concepts. The focus is on both the understanding of the content discipline and the understanding of the arts concepts. Teachers are to consider the concepts, skills, vocabulary, and assessments for both subjects equally. In this model, students benefit from learning a higher level of arts rather than using them as a vehicle to teach content knowledge. Co-equal arts and content discipline lessons are used to teach skills and concepts with equal attention to how the arts are used or perceived and how the core content can align.

Multicultural Benefits of Including the Arts

Educational design and methods that recognize the cultural diversity of today's students are just as important as raising student academic achievement. Infusing the arts into the everyday curriculum has the propensity to not only enhance the teaching of other subjects, such as ELA and social studies, but to also promote understanding and appreciation of different cultures (Burstein & Knotts, 2021; Le, 2019). Arts education, specifically relating to content that connects humans to culture, is essential because it can be the one and only link students have with the world outside of their individual community (Meyer, 2005). Likewise, art education may give students more opportunity to express their emotions and

develop self-identity (Rabkin & Redmond, 2006). Knowledge, experience, and activities based around language, culture, diversity, identity, democracy, geo-literacy, performing arts, citizenship, expression, and multiculturalism are some of the few important concepts children need to have a deep understanding of before graduating high school.

Students in America come from a large and increasing number of ethnic, cultural, and linguistically diverse families (Juvonen et al., 2018). There is substantial evidence from student data such as assessment scores, report card grades, graduation rates, and other frequent indicators of school success and student growth which shows students from different ethnic and culturally diverse backgrounds experience fewer educational milestones than their peers (Cohen 2017; Gay, 2010; Lury, 2016; Wells, 1993). Other factors such as low socio-economic status, insufficient training or professional development opportunities for teachers and staff, biased assessment practices, and institutional racism, aggregate this negative impact (Saporito & Lareau, 1999). In order for diverse students to obtain critical knowledge, skills, and higher academic achievement rates, educational systems must shift their priorities and policies, including fixing discrepancies in all curricula, and focus on improving instructional practices, modernizing teacher training, including more culturally relevant and responsive practices, and immersing students in art related activities (Catterall et al., 1999; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2021).

There is no one answer to the question: “what is art?” In fact, there are many ways to create art, analyze art, and be immersed in art (Catterall et al., 1999). Yet, the power of art’s influence on society is unmistakable. Art allows humans to be deeply connected to culture. Since the cultural views, beliefs and contexts of our students are so important in helping them be successful in school, some researchers believe art can be a medium that bridges the gap between cultures and allows for cultural expression and understanding to illuminate (Bennett, 2001; Chalmers, 1996; Freedman, 2013; Gay, 2010; etc.). Art is not usually a traditional aspect of curriculum nor is it the main approach to understanding culture in a cross-cultural sense, however in every culture in the world, artistic expression creates a personal and unique channel for thoughts, feelings, identity, traditions, and beliefs (Freedman, 2013). It is generally less important to define what art actually is and more useful to look at the impact and meaning of art in order to understand how deeply these various forms of expression are connected with a particular culture (Bennett, 2001; Chin, 2013). The human experience is an increasingly globalized phenomenon in which people are constantly being influenced by transnational, cross-cultural, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic interactions (Chin, 2013). Particularly in certain American cities, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, and New York, to name a few, where diversity is prominent and continually fluctuating, students need education and understanding in the various cultures that make up their everyday communities. Art preserves what fact-based historical records cannot: how it felt to exist in a particular place at a particular time. In this sense, art is communication; it allows people from different cultures and different times to communicate with each other via different forms (Burstein-Knotts, 2021; Freedman, 2013). Hence, multicultural art education can bring about success in supporting the many aspects of the whole child: academics, linguistics, social-emotional, and behavioral. Furthermore, exposing students to multicultural experiences

allows them to learn ways to communicate with multiple cultural contexts beyond the classroom.

Language Acquisition Through Art and Culture

One of the most relevant benefits of using art integration in today's classroom is the language possibilities it provides for English Language Learners (ELLs). Many visual symbols and images are universally recognized (e.g., an image of an apple will be recognized as such, regardless of an individual's native language), and expression through art making has allowed students who have varying first languages to develop bonding interactions and relationships (Kumagai, 1994). Many best practices for teaching English learners and teaching art have the potential to overlap, thus a marriage of the two is natural and practical (Freedman, 2013; Stuhr, 1994). Chalmers (1996) recommends using cooperative learning strategies to foster deeper communication in elementary-age students. He believes that when teachers organize skills and content around themes, for example, using informal, family-like settings, students make deeper connections with one another. Here the teacher works with small groups, rather than focusing on large group instruction, to enhance culture related activities. In this scenario, the teacher can monitor and support appropriate discussion and conversation through the integration of arts and multiculturalism. When using techniques to enhance achievement, like differentiating, and understanding the process of targeted small group instruction, especially when student needs are so varied, differentiating can be a challenge. Fortunately, verbal dialogue is central to differentiation. Teachers can identify different learning abilities and adapt their oral explanations, teaching phrases, and support to different academic and linguistic levels. Differentiation relies on teacher-pupil interaction, and an ability in the educator to engage students in both simple and complex dialogue according to their learning needs. When teachers do their best to learn about students' linguistic cultures in order to better understand their progress, often the barrier of communication is broken down and both parties can communicate even if they both speak different languages (Freedman, 2013).

Conclusion

As we earlier discovered, the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2023) defines 'teacher' as, "one whose occupation is to instruct". It is clear from the variety of examples in this discussion that elementary teachers instruct. But many times, elementary teachers are only instructing based on a scripted, guided, or textbook-heavy curriculum informed solely by standards and standardized assessments. It is within this standards-driven, outcomes-based climate and over-arching educational context, we encourage teachers to maintain autonomous, informed decision-making about how, what, and when to teach their students the required content.

This paper was informed by the notion of creative agency and advocates that teachers can accomplish the goals of this standards-driven environment, all while becoming intellectual risk-takers (Beghetto et al., 2021; Clark & Soutter, 2022) by addressing targeted populations (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Queer, plus [LGBTQ+], English Language Learners [ELL]), and implementing content beyond English Language Arts (ELA) and math

by intentional integration of the visual and performing arts in innovative (and necessary) ways . We recommend that teachers become intellectual risk-takers by rethinking standardized content through revolutionary, disruptive, and authentic practice by interrogating curriculum and even developing their own that address the needs of these targeted populations and content that is often ignored. We suggest teachers can have the creative confidence to promote culturally responsive practices at these three possible starting points and simultaneously better meet the needs of all 21st Century students. If teachers are 'those who instruct' we are encouraging them to decide on how best to do that.

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