



Photo provided

This fish demonstrates arts infusion and reflects the creative product of a lesson designed for kindergarten to second grade students in the theme of relationship. The lesson is a combination of science (studying fish), visual arts (line, shape, color), and language arts (vocabulary, storytelling).

Creating an atmosphere **for learning**

Project CREATES is having a lasting impact on school children by changing the work of teachers in the Tulsa Public Schools.

Connecting Community Resources Encouraging All Teachers to Educate with Spirit (CREATES) was born in 2000 and Dr. Diane Montgomery, professor in the College of Education's School of Applied Health and Educational Psychology, was there at the beginning. Montgomery served as the principal investigator for the project's research component.

The mission of Project CREATES was "to develop and deliver high-quality academic instruction infused with high-quality arts instruction for students attending urban elementary schools of need in the Tulsa community."

After two years of the pilot work, the Barthelmes Foundation gave OSU a \$250,000 contract in 2002-2003. At the end of that year, the foundation saw a major return on its investment and awarded another \$1 million and a four-year contract (2003-2007) for research on cultural changes, equity, and sustainability of the activities.

"The purpose was to conduct research on transforming teaching and learning through the arts," Montgomery said. "We looked at a culture of change connected to our conception of co-creation. Our goal was equity combined with excellence."

Project CREATES set out to develop rich and challenging curricula for all students while identifying and supporting talent development with under-identified and under-served populations of students. Music and visual arts were the vehicles used. The project's focus included arts infusion, professional development for teachers and artists, talent development for students with interest or potential in the arts, and especially research on the outcomes.

The project aimed to expand on the traditional artists-in-residence model, which may be stand alone programs separate from other curricula. Arts Resource Coaches (ARCs) worked with teachers and artists daily in Project CREATES. These individuals were practicing artists with mastery in a particular arts area who also had experience in curricula and pedagogy.

Classroom instructors worked with community artists and arts educators (ARCs) to co-create lessons, including all instructional aspects of co-planning, co-teaching and co-evaluating. Students painted, sculpted, danced, and played music, investigating their core curriculum and demonstrating standards, objectives, and benchmarks in new and exciting ways.

Examples included a lesson titled "Stomp!" which taught students rhythm and patterns through composing and performing music using common objects; and "What a Wonderful World," a lesson in which students created a painting or drawing and learned history by analyzing lyrics for the song.

"It was so successful that (teachers) became overwhelmed with how motivating it was to collaborate," said Montgomery, who received the OSU-Tulsa President's Excellence in Teaching Award in 2008.

Montgomery and her team employed a unique and innovative research model that used mixed methods. The research team did not serve to externally evaluate how the lessons were received by the children; they co-planned and implemented the project using immediate research feedback to change it. They were able to make adjustments to what was happening and then continue to document the culture.

"One of the innovations, we felt, was that the people providing services in the schools – the arts educators and our teachers – became researchers," Montgomery noted. "They assisted in making observations and providing data to graduate students who were researchers in the schools."

Another unique aspect of the program was that it focused only on teachers who responded to the invitation to participate. Total school commitment was not required. Teachers chose to participate at the level they felt comfortable in terms of their time commitments, interests, and strengths.

One manuscript in press describes teacher outcomes using a circus metaphor. One group of teachers, "Crack the Whip," did not use the arts until they had time. Another group, "Walking the Tightrope," felt a pull with doing art and the traditional mode of presentation and preparing for assessments. Another large group of teachers, "Flying the Trapeze," felt freed by doing art and that their students were going to learn the content well with joy and creativity.

Project CREATES research resulted in more than 30 publications and presentations at the regional, national and international level.

Project CREATES extended beyond the classroom and into the community in the form of visual art displays at libraries, student coffee houses, poetry readings, musical performances and plays. The events were attended by parents and families and supported by community agencies.

From the observations they made and the data collected, Montgomery and her team learned a number of things about the educators and children involved.

They found that involvement in the arts did not take away from student achievement. Also, children who participated in music talent development were found to be better readers and were also better in science and social studies. Creativity scores increased.

It was reported that children had a sense of accomplishment and were better with their self-governing behaviors – concentrating, intensity of thought and engagement with the task.

Though research continues, initial findings demonstrate the need for teachers to gain comfort in using the arts in their classrooms.

"It takes three years to make significant changes, three years to see the momentum occur," Montgomery said. "Our quantitative data demonstrates that the third year, we made a significant difference in what teachers were doing and how they were perceiving the value of the arts and collaborating with artists."

The research team noted that it takes five years to make this arts program sustainable. Though the research contract for Project CREATES concluded in 2007, the program is sustaining in the original target schools and four new schools. Research indicated that key elements to sustaining the programs included community support, administrative action, and a critical mass of teacher involvement. Support from the community surged, evident by Tulsa arts agencies' continued efforts. Donors are providing resources, scholarships for special music instruction are available, and professional development for teachers and artists continues. Active support continues from District administrators and schools remain committed to using the arts.

"We're proud to see the schools continue with combining equity and excellence in arts infusion and talent development," Montgomery said.

Christy Lang



Photo by Phil Stockley

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