



# Advising the Arts: Strengthening Arts-Based Learning

## ■ PROJECT CO-ORDINATORS

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## OBJECTIVES OF THIS PROJECT

- To build new partnerships and foster the sharing of expertise between OISE arts instructors and associate teachers in elementary schools
- To expand the range of arts education learning opportunities for our teacher candidates by collaborating with our associate teachers to build an arts focus

## RESEARCH PARTNERS

- Vivian East, J.B. Tyrrell Senior Public School
- Jackie Gaistman, Faywood Arts-Based Curriculum School
- Juliet Hess, Glen Shields Public School
- Rayma Hill, Parkdale Junior & Senior Public School
- Diane Jamieson, Howard Junior School
- Anne Werbitsky, Nelson Mandela Park Public School

## THE PROJECT IN BRIEF

The Advising the Arts conference, *JumpstART*, built on the strengths of the arts education components of the initial teacher education program at OISE by developing relationships between six arts-based associate teachers, our teacher candidates, and our arts instructors. Establishing and strengthening these relationships better integrated the expertise of arts-based associate teachers into the initial teacher education experience through workshops, practica, and internship placements. The project has increased awareness of arts education both in the initial teacher education program and in our partner schools, and has extended our teacher candidates' learning in the arts by giving them opportunities to work with arts-based master teachers.

Arts education plays an important role in elementary students' learning. It develops and deepens their literacy skills, supports creative problem-solving and critical thinking abilities, and helps build cultural knowledge (Eisner, 2002; Goldberg, 2001). Arts education should therefore be a fundamental part of the preservice experience to provide teacher candidates with the expertise they need to implement meaningful arts education in their future classrooms. Central to the successful implementation of an arts focus is the collaboration among teacher education instructors, associate teachers in partnership schools, and teacher candidates themselves (Langdon, Weltzl-Fairchild, & Haggart, 1997).

This research project aimed at improving such collaboration in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE) program by developing relationships between our arts-based associate teachers, our teacher candidates, and our arts instructors. By establishing and strengthening these relationships, we were better able to integrate the expertise of our associate teachers into the program, offering a greater array of talks, workshops, practica, and internship placements. Our motivation was to take a step towards improving arts-based learning in the initial teacher education program, and to build a support network to continue to develop arts-based learning in our program in future years.

## STAGES OF THE PROJECT

### ■ STAGE ONE: Advising the Arts

The project began in September 2005 with a search for six arts-based teachers in our partner schools. Three elementary visual arts teachers volunteered, as did three music teachers. The "team" completed a questionnaire about their previous experiences as associate teachers, and then participated in a focus group on campus on the challenges of arts-based learning in the initial teacher education program. They agreed to lead workshops at a spring arts conference for our elementary candidates and assisted in the early stages of its planning.

### ■ STAGE TWO: Activating the Arts

The team returned to campus in March 2006 to lead workshops alongside OISE arts instructors at *JumpstART: Activating Education Through the Arts*, an arts education conference offered to elementary teacher candidates at OISE. Energizing performances by two elementary student groups—Segome, a group of Ghanaian drummers from Glen Shields P.S. and The Detentions, a rock band from Nelson Mandela Park P.S.—celebrated artistic learning and jumpstarted the daylong conference that offered 32 workshops. Candidates were invited to provide feedback informally and formally via an online survey. The associate teacher team was also invited to complete a post-study questionnaire on their involvement in the research project.



### ■ STAGE THREE: Analyzing the Arts

The focus group, associate teacher questionnaires, and teacher candidate surveys provided rich findings. Data from the questionnaires and focus group were thematically analyzed; data from the teacher candidate survey were quantitatively analyzed for correlations and statistical significance.

### ■ STAGE FOUR: Advancing the Arts

This research project brought immediate benefits to the initial teacher education program. We used the profile of arts-based learning and heightened awareness of the need to improve arts-based learning within the program. Teacher candidates were invigorated by their contact at the conference with the associate teacher team, OISE instructors, and artists—helping to increase their feelings of competence in arts-based teaching. Some members of the associate teacher team took on teacher candidates for internship placements in the spring for the first time, and all have expressed a desire to participate more fully in the initial teacher education program in the future as workshop leaders, guest speakers, and research partners.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Our data collection methods—a focus group, questionnaires, informal feedback, online survey—allowed us to focus on four research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of arts-based associate teachers towards their practicum responsibilities and the initial teacher education program? How can these be improved or strengthened?
2. What types of expertise can arts-based associate teachers bring to enhance student learning on campus?
3. Is this project an effective means of increasing the number of arts-based associate teachers for elementary practicum placements?
4. Is a one-day Arts Education Day an effective means of increasing initial teacher education students' exposure to arts education on campus?

### ■ Data from the Associate Teacher Team

Three key strands emerged from the data collected from the associate teacher team.

#### I. Challenges of Arts-Based Practicum Placements

The first strand was an acknowledgement of the challenges of taking on teacher candidates for arts-based placements. The team recognized the benefits of taking on teacher candidates in practica; they found it to be “mutually beneficial” as they continued to learn about teaching through the process. However, they also acknowledged that arts-based teaching positions are often itinerant or part-time in nature, making it difficult to commit to a full-time practicum placement in one school. Team members with full-time positions recognized that learning about the arts at the elementary level is often ad hoc, making it hard to promise a concentrated experience in arts education. A few members of the team saw shortcomings in the current system of becoming associates at OISE as selection relies on their principal's recommendation. These teachers asked for a more direct means of becoming involved in practica, and for a stronger system of support such as initial training on campus and ongoing professional development for mentors.

## JUMPSTART: ACTIVATING EDUCATION THROUGH THE ARTS

### Dance, drama, visual arts, music

In March 2006, more than 350 OISE students attended a full day of workshops and instruction in discipline content and pedagogy to inspire our teacher candidates' classroom practice. Thirty-two workshops were led by OISE faculty, Toronto District School Board (TDSB) instructional leaders, TDSB and York Region District School Board (YRDSB) teachers, private school teachers, Arts for Children instructors, and TDSB students.

#### 2. Continued Collaborations

A second strand evident in the data focused on university/school collaborations. While their attitudes towards OISE were positive or at least neutral at the outset, all of the teachers expressed a desire for more collaboration between their school boards and the initial teacher education program once the project had finished. Driven by a desire to exchange professional knowledge with university educators and teacher candidates, they wanted to play a greater role in teacher education beyond that of associate teacher; most felt that they had expertise and experience that could be shared through workshops, lectures, or classroom visits.

#### 3. Building Community

A desire for stronger professional learning communities was the third strand that emerged. The associate team enjoyed the opportunity to meet others through their involvement in *JumpstART*, and the research project *Advising the Arts*, and expressed an interest in future opportunities to meet with other associate teachers. They saw this professional learning community as a means of sharing ideas about mentoring and teaching, of acting as a curriculum and problem-solving resource, and as a way to continue their own professional learning. They did, however, acknowledge time as the limiting factor in their involvement, and recognized the need for paid release time to participate. Some members of the team noted that this type of project was a good first step and they would willingly be involved again. One wrote: “Thank you for the opportunity to be part of the OISE arts conference. It was a fantastic experience...it really was a pleasure to be a part of the day!”

### ■ Data from Teacher Candidates

Data collected via an online survey from 75 teacher candidates shed light on the value of the conference in particular, and on the state of arts-based learning in the program in general. Attitudinal data clearly showed that our candidates understood the importance of arts education in elementary classrooms, but lacked confidence in their ability to teach the arts. Candidates requested that instruction time in arts education be increased, particularly in drama and dance. One candidate adamantly pointed out that “we need more! [The arts are] enjoyable, practical and can be integrated with any subject, and are extremely relevant for life, careers, and so much more—so why not focus more on it at OISE?”





Satisfaction with the arts conference was high, reflected in both formal and informal feedback from teacher candidates. One candidate wrote: "I just wanted to say that I thought the two [workshops] that I attended were fantastic. Both artist-teachers were very well prepared and approachable. I definitely got some good resources to use in the classroom." Most felt strongly that it should be offered again in the future, scheduled earlier in the year, but extended over two days to allow for participation in more workshops. As one candidate commented: "I definitely think it should be repeated, but the problem is that a one-day conference just isn't enough. I'd love to have a full week where you are just saturated with art and art integration." Many candidates indicated that the conference increased their confidence in teaching the arts, making the conference a valuable addition to the teacher education program.

## IMPACT

This project has been instrumental in building relationships, and beginning a dialogue around arts education within teacher education. The associate teacher team indicated a keen interest in becoming more involved in teacher education by hosting teacher candidates during practica and internships, as well as by contributing to classes on campus. Two associates commented on the impact the project had on their students who had performed at the conference; they saw their involvement as an authentic and remarkable learning experience. One teacher wrote: "The kids had an absolute blast teaching adults. They were so excited about it and kept coming up with more things we could teach. They don't get many opportunities like that to show what they know. Really, it was the students who ran the workshop. I know it will be something they will remember."

Certainly the *JumpstART* conference offered a forum to share expertise and information, ask questions, and network with colleagues. Workshop leaders from both inside and outside the initial teacher education program indicated how they benefited professionally from preparing for and presenting at the conference. They enjoyed meeting our teacher candidates and felt they had had a positive effect on their development. So much so that some indicated a desire to become more involved in teacher education at OISE in the future.

The teacher candidates benefited from a day of arts enrichment, learning from and connecting with master arts educators. Through the conference, arts instruction time increased from 24 to 28 hours, and teacher candidates voiced a strong recommendation for more arts education in the initial teacher education program through arts classes, integration in other subjects, and practica experiences. What remains unclear, however, is the effectiveness of a one-day conference in relation to more instruction hours in the regular arts classes or through integration in other subject areas; studies in future years may help to ascertain this.

OISE instructors also felt the positive impact of this project. We extended our professional network, revisited our own curricula with the guidance of our peers, and took steps to generate a list of associate teachers in the arts to support practicum placements. The project generated a new energy that now surrounds arts-based learning and we are reaping the benefits. We hope this interest will fuel the program so that it can continue to improve the arts-based learning experiences of our candidates and associate teachers in the coming years.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

- **Associate teachers:**
  - Provide a wider range of mentorship support for new and existing associate teachers
  - Involve associate teachers in initial teacher education in a variety of ways—beyond practica placements
  - Invest time and resources in strengthening relationships with associate teachers
- **Teacher candidates:**
  - Ensure that teacher candidates in the arts receive arts-based practica experiences
  - Consider creative ways to increase instruction time for arts education in the initial teacher education program in order to improve candidates' confidence in teaching arts education

## NEXT STEPS AND NEW QUESTIONS

As a result of this project, we are considering creative ways to continue to improve arts-based learning in OISE's initial teacher education program. We are planning another conference and have secured funding for an arts integration pilot project. We have expanded our list of arts-based associate teachers for practica and internship placements, and will take a more proactive role in promoting their involvement. And, we hope to implement the next stage of this project in the next academic year by building a new set of relationships with associate teachers who run extracurricular arts clubs, allowing our candidates to participate in arts-based service learning projects to develop their teaching skills and contribute to the cultural life of their school communities. Each of these undertakings are driven by their own set of questions and challenges, but ultimately should result in a noticeable enhancement to arts education in initial teacher education at OISE.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the six associate teachers who collaborated with us on this project, the workshop leaders who generously gave their time to *JumpstART*, and the energy, risk-taking, and artistic expression of our teacher candidates, each of whom continue to inspire us in our ongoing learning in arts education.

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