

BEST PRACTICE

Third Edition

Today's Standards for Teaching & Learning in America's Schools



READING
WRITING
MATHEMATICS
SCIENCE
SOCIAL STUDIES
THE ARTS



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of the American school curriculum. A more general, progressive educational paradigm is emerging across content boundaries and grade levels. This coherent philosophy and spirit is reaching across the curriculum and up through the grades. Whether it is called Best Practice, integrated learning, interdisciplinary studies, or authentic instruction, or some other name or no name at all, this movement is broad and deep and enduring. It is strongly backed by educational research, draws on sound learning theory, and, under other names, has been tested and refined over many years.

What is the nature of this new/old curriculum? What assumptions and theories about learning inform this approach? What is the underlying educational philosophy of this reemergent paradigm? If we study the more/less list systematically, we can identify thirteen interlocking principles, assumptions, or theories that characterize this model of education. These principles are deeply interrelated, each influencing the others. And the list of principles, as you'll see, can be grouped into three main clusters. The first five elements address various aspects of student-centered teaching and learning.

STUDENT-CENTERED: The best starting point for schooling is young people's real interests; all across the curriculum, investigating students' own questions should always take precedence over studying arbitrarily and distantly selected "content."

Experiential: Active, hands-on, concrete experience is the most powerful and natural form of learning. Students should be immersed in the most direct possible experience of the content of every subject.

Holistic: Children learn best when they encounter whole ideas, events, and materials in purposeful contexts, not by studying subparts isolated from actual use.

Authentic: Real, rich, complex ideas and materials are at the heart of the curriculum. Lessons or textbooks that water down, control, or oversimplify content ultimately disempower students.

Challenging: Students learn best when faced with genuine challenges, choices, and responsibility in their own learning.

The next five principles draw our attention to cognitive and developmental aspects of teaching and learning.

COGNITIVE: The most powerful learning comes when children develop true understanding of concepts through higher-order thinking associated with various fields of inquiry and through self-monitoring of their thinking.

Developmental: Children grow through a series of definable but not rigid stages, and schooling should fit its activities to the developmental level of students.

Constructivist: Children do not just receive content; in a very real sense, they recreate and reinvent every cognitive system they encounter, including language, literacy, and mathematics.

Expressive: To fully engage ideas, construct meaning, and remember information, students must regularly employ the whole range of communicative media—speech, writing, drawing, poetry, dance, drama, music, movement, and visual arts.

Reflective: Balancing the immersion in experience must be opportunities for learners to reflect, debrief, and abstract from their experiences what they have felt and thought and learned.

The final three principles remind us to attend to the social and interpersonal aspects of teaching and learning in schools.

SOCIAL: Learning is always socially constructed and often interactive; teachers need to create classroom interactions that “scaffold” learning.

Collaborative: Cooperative learning activities tap the social power of learning better than competitive and individualistic approaches.

Democratic: The classroom is a model community; students learn what they live as citizens of the school.

We can represent these three clusters of principles graphically, as shown in Figure 1.1.

The remainder of this book, as we discuss each subject in the school curriculum, spells out what these key principles really mean in practice. However, to explain why these ideas are so important, we’ll elaborate briefly on them now.

standards, in art or any other subject, to be simply additive. Reform does not mean larger and larger time allocations for any subject that can make a case for itself: more time for math, more time for art, more time for drivers' education. Instead of waging these craven turf wars, educators should be using time in new, more powerful ways. We need synergy, overlap, integration.

That's why key national arts organizations like the Arts Education Partnership and its 140 affiliated groups take a different approach. Instead of politicking to shoehorn more art classes into school schedules, the partnerships ask: How can art experiences leverage the existing curriculum? How can art be a tool of learning instead of just another disconnected school subject? A key book about this kind of art education, *Renaissance in the Classroom* (Burnaford, Aprill, and Weiss 2001), shows how the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) has transformed learning in scores of city schools and documented growth in both student achievement and teacher morale. CAPE was the partner for the project described at the beginning of this chapter, in which Linda Voss and Eleanor Nayvelt's students used music, dance, visual art, and drama to learn history. That story showed the integrating role that the arts can take in our schools. We don't have to steal time away from reading, math, or science to do art; instead, art helps us to do science, math, and reading—to explore them, express them, and connect them. Indeed, the arts are the prototypical “integratable” subjects; music, dance, visual art, and drama have a rightful place in every field of human inquiry. The story coming up at the end of this chapter is also from a CAPE school, and shows how one art form—in this case, the Mexican *retablo*—can anchor a ten-week, team-taught, cross-curricular middle school unit in language arts and history.

QUALITIES OF BEST PRACTICE IN TEACHING THE ARTS

Now that we have looked at the development of arts standards over the past two decades, we can draw on all the key reports to talk more specifically about “what works” in school art programs.

Students should do art, not just view art. From the earliest preschool years, children have a powerful urge to make art. We don't have to “assign” children to draw with markers, chant jump-rope rhymes, share dramatic monologues, make theatrical faces, or dance. Artistic expression seems to be wired into children's genes. Therefore, the first job of teachers and other adults is to

get out of the way and let kids express and experiment. We need to provide tools, materials, equipment, models, examples, coaching, and plenty of time. Grown-ups don't have much trouble taking this role until about third or fourth grade, when they start thinking maybe they should make the kids put away the songs and crayons and get serious. While it is probably OK to "get serious" about math or science for part of the school day, it is most definitely not OK to put away art or the exploratory, playful spirit that drives it. As kids get older and the curriculum gets more overstuffed with content-area mandates, smart teachers incorporate art activities into integrated curriculum units. Students who are reading a novel can show their understanding by illustrating critical scenes, acting them out, translating them into movement and dance, or creating background music for them. In every subject, doing the arts can provide new ways of exploring and expressing ideas about practically anything—the Civil War, triangles, photosynthesis, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The arts should be integrated across the curriculum as well as taught as separate disciplines. The arts have value both in themselves and as useful tools of thought and connection throughout life. That means schools with exemplary arts programs will have a balance of arts discipline teaching and arts integration across the curriculum. There are infinite opportunities for weaving artistic thinking and expression into the rest of the curriculum. Ideally, the arts take a central place in broad, interdisciplinary inquiry projects that teachers and students plan together and that extend over long chunks of time. After all, life is integrated, not divided into separate-subject events. Real-life projects and problems tend to be interdisciplinary, and the arts can be a lever for understanding, connecting, or sharing inquiries into them. School should be organized in the same way, preparing students for that real, complex world.

Children need to exercise genuine choice, control, and responsibility in their art making. This chapter's opening image, of hallways decorated with identical children's art, symbolizes the way schools too often turn art from a creative process into an obedience ritual. Indeed, why would any child care about "art" after a few years of mandatory matching leprechauns, especially if she is also being graded on the caliber of her copying? Choice is an integral part of artistic thinking. Real artists choose their own subjects, materials, media, and audiences. They decide how to begin, when something is valuable, when something should be abandoned, when something is ready for an

audience. In school, students should be helped to learn how to exercise the same kinds of choices.

This means that there should be plenty of “free” art time, when students have authority for deciding what kind of art or music or drama or dance they want to make, and responsibility for carrying out their choices, under careful teacher guidance. In some school subjects, like reading and writing, we call this student-directed segment of the day “workshop,” and it alternates with equally important teacher-guided lessons. Elsewhere during the daily or weekly schedule, whole classes can pursue more focused, teacher-guided art activities. For example, after reading a short story, everyone can make a torn-paper collage that represents an interpretation of one of the characters. As long as students have real choices within such assignments, deciding within the teacher’s parameters what to represent and how to represent it, this kind of art making provides an excellent balance for open-ended workshop time.

Students should be helped to nurture their special talents and to find their strongest art form. Every student’s education should assist in the lifelong quest to discover and develop one’s strongest, most powerful modes of expression. If we take seriously the theory of multiple intelligences (or even if we simply go back to the American educational platitude about developing each child’s full potential), we realize that people have different strengths, gifts, and talents. If there are indeed eight intelligences, as Howard Gardner claims, then arts clearly tap into many of them. This means schools must not just tolerate, but celebrate and extend children’s various talents, inviting them to explore a wide range, make selections, and gain lots of practice in their areas of greatest strength and highest potential. A straightforward approach to this is taken by the Key School in Indianapolis. During the morning, every student pursues what looks like a normal elementary or middle school program. Then, after lunch, everyone goes off to study their chosen, usually strongest, intelligence. The musical kids get out their horns and blow, the writers make poetry, the kinesthetic kids refine their physical skills, the artists paint and sculpt. This is one school—one of very few schools—that organizes itself so that all children actually do find success and develop their talents.

The arts should be used as a tool of thinking. While students need plenty of chances to create final, polished artworks, the arts should also regularly be

employed as tools for the exploration of ideas, without being pushed to final, edited, or exhibited forms. These informal, tentative, exploratory applications of the arts can help kids engage and grapple with ideas in any subject area. For example, teachers often ask students to keep a learning log in which they write notes about their learning. Instead, teachers can have students keep a sketchbook, where they can still jot words—or sketch pictures, make diagrams, map ideas, or create unique combinations of words and graphic elements in response to class activities. Another example is the strategy called “say something,” in which students are asked to give an immediate verbal response after hearing a presentation, reading a story, or conducting an experiment (Short et al. 1996). Adding the artistic choices, students can “draw something,” “dance something,” “sing something,” or “act something” after any content lesson. These kinds of expression are not refined, formal artworks; rather, they are spontaneous, along-the-way uses of art as a tool of thinking. But when teachers add these different media to the instructional mix, many more students’ learning styles are engaged, and more students can comprehend and remember what they study.

Students should experience a wide variety of art forms. Music, drama, visual art, and dance should be included throughout students’ schooling. To begin with, all children will naturally participate in certain art forms in their own homes and communities, and they can be invited to bring these into school. These should be welcomed, honored, and studied, whatever they are: folk dance, cartooning, teen zines, hip-hop music, jump-rope chants, or “playing the dozens,” the dueling insults game. Teachers and schools should be careful not to judge or devalue children’s enjoyment of art forms considered “lowbrow.” Any of these popular or childhood art forms could be the base upon which a lifelong artistic involvement is built.

But it is also the job of teachers and schools to widen the range, to introduce children to the wondrous variety of arts from around the world and back through time. This certainly includes traditional “high culture” art, which can be encountered more than just reverentially. It is worth remembering that Shakespearean drama was popular entertainment in its day, that Oscar Wilde toured English coal-mining towns giving boisterously received readings, that Mozart’s wind ensemble pieces were written as dinner party entertainment, and that in the nineteenth century, American symphony orchestras often played parties and weddings. School should also expose

children to arts from a wider range of cultural and ethnic groups, and arts that represent people around the world. And "experience" does not just mean observing these diverse forms, but trying one's own hand at them. Kids should try a Polish folk dance, make a portrait after the style of Frida Kahlo, perform a scene from Shakespeare, memorize and recite a set of haiku. As a result of this wide exposure and experimentation, students will gain an informed acquaintance with many exemplary artworks, not as arbitrary ingredients on a list of "cultural literacy," but as a natural byproduct of becoming artistic thinkers and students of cultural history.

Students should have opportunities to share their work. Young artists should be provided safe and encouraging venues to perform, exhibit, or publish their work, both what they create during the study of specific arts disciplines and the products completed within wider interdisciplinary inquiries. During each step in the process of creating such artworks, there should be routine, informal, noncritical collaboration among student pairs, teams, and groups, paralleling the way that cooperative groups work to gradually create objects or events in many "real" art forms. When works move toward a more final, potentially public form, teachers can help students set up exhibitions or performances that reach a wider audience of other students, parents, and community members. These occasions are not provided mainly for competition, ranking, or scoring students against each other, and certainly not for putting a few students on stage and silencing others. In the adult world of professional art, there may be a place for competition; in public schools, the fundamental job of teachers is to ensure that all children have chances to advance successfully through whole cycles of art making, over and over throughout their school years, and to provide real, supportive audiences.

This means that when teachers help students publish class magazines, everyone's best story is included; when plays are produced, everybody gets a part; when dances are created, there are roles for all; when collages are hung, every one goes on the wall. Schools may periodically sponsor selective, competitive programs, but the main work of arts education is helping everyone grow, not encouraging a faction and prematurely excluding others. For everyone, these culminating experiences provide a natural and realistic kind of pressure to do one's best: to prepare carefully, to practice, to polish, to refine. And the main purpose of this sharing is the same for students as for grown-up artists: to connect with and learn from an audience.

Children should attend a variety of professional arts events. Schools should take students to performances and exhibitions, as well as bring artists and performers to school. Especially in poorer communities, children's exposure to the arts may well depend on the school's taking this kind of action. But the annual bus trip to the symphony is not enough. A school's schedule of arts performances should be continuous and varied, and should include not just "downtown" institutions, but local community arts organizations, musicians, galleries, and dance and theater companies as well. These visits and performances should not be disconnected inoculations of culture or random treats; instead, they should be integrated into the ongoing curriculum of the school. Events should be chosen either because they fit an existing school theme or focus, or because an academic theme will be built around them. Making the most of any performance means starting well before the event, with students and teachers learning background information, reading, doing artwork, getting ready to actively engage the performance. Afterward, it is important for students to respond, debrief, and critique, to connect the event to their ongoing studies. A valuable experience, where possible, is for artists to talk with students after a performance or during an exhibit, sharing candidly how they work and think. Even more valuable is conversation with artists *before* they perform, when they open up their own planning and preparation process, sharing their real creative struggles with students.

Artists should be present in schools and classrooms. There's something special and different about people who make their livelihoods as musicians, videomakers, dancers, actors, sculptors, artists, poets, Web game designers, storytellers, or painters. They can make special, sometimes magical, connections with young people and provide knowledge, motivation, and inspiration to growing artists. Therefore, children need chances to meet, observe, and work with adult artists in their school. While one-shot performances and traditional residencies are helpful, even better are genuine long-term partnerships between the school and community arts organizations, providing sustained, intensive arts experiences for children, coplaned with the regular teachers and integrated into the school's overall curriculum. This model transforms the artist from a transient celebrity to a long-term consultant and deeply involves the classroom teacher as a coartist, as well.

All teachers, not just arts specialists, should be artists in their classroom. If we expect students to take risks and grow artistically, teachers must be willing to do the same, demonstrating how a grown-up grows. This is no

different from the demand that teachers read with their students, explore science with them, be a fellow writer with them. Still, this requirement frightens many working teachers whose own artistic explorations may have been shut off in childhood, and who don't feel the least bit like artists in any medium or genre. The fact that our culture tends to label artists as "gifted," rather than credit them as largely self-made practitioners who studied long and hard to develop their "gift," adds to this feeling among teachers and other citizens that they are not worthy to participate. We do not ask regular classroom teachers to be professional-caliber artists, but simply to act as ordinary citizens who use the tools of the arts to explore ideas and express themselves. Like students, teachers will probably be on a quest to find and develop their strongest and most preferred arts discipline, as well as trying to grow in others.

A good arts education begins when loving parents respond to their infant's earliest expressions—gurgling, smiling, babbling—with delight, amazement, and the predisposition to see it all as meaningful. The sometimes comical tendency of parents to dote on their children's earliest utterances, however meaningless they sound to outsiders, is an important factor in child development. A natural extension of this phenomenon is the refrigerator door, where parents proudly post their young children's first attempts at visual art. The adults don't mark them up with red pens, critique them. Instead, they look at the three-legged blue horse, get a tear in their eye, hug the kid, and get out the Scotch tape.

- Parents should immerse their offspring in the arts. Recent brain research pointing to the importance of early and diverse stimulation of young minds only adds validation to the wisdom of providing children an arts-rich childhood. Parents and kids can draw, paint, and sing together at home. Parents can involve children as they pursue their own artistic activities—practicing piano, sewing, painting, reading novels.
- Although TV viewing is condemned by many educators and child-development experts, it is an inevitable part of the landscape, and parents may mitigate its banality and passivity by watching with their children; guiding them to better choices; renting tapes of

All of these strategies help to work with teachers' resistance, rather than opposing it head-on. Negative approaches, arbitrary mandates, and punitive labels engender resentment and quiet, passive resistance that, in the long run, can undermine any program.

4. Quality Learning for Teachers

Build staff development around experiential activities, rather than theoretical lectures.

The workshop leaders are starting seventy-five teachers on a writing-reading in-service program. After introductions, the teachers are asked to jot on a four-by-six notecard their own goals and concerns about teaching writing. In pairs they discuss what they've written, and then share their thoughts with the larger group, to be listed on the overhead.

With the list fresh in mind, the group embarks on a reading-writing activity. One leader reads aloud Wednesday Surprise, by Eve Bunting, a moving story about a child and her grandmother and learning to read. The leaders then guide the group through several rounds of "dialogue journal" writing. Partners each jot down thoughts about the book and then trade papers, responding to the ideas and reactions of the other—a legitimized form of note passing. With this particular book, the teachers invariably write about experiences with literacy—and illiteracy—in their families. People are involved and moved as several volunteers read aloud. The teachers conclude their sharing, and connect the activity with their initial concerns and their thoughts on how to use the strategy.

These activities are far more than just the demonstrations. We are not simply training teachers to use a new tool. Rather, the best activities provide a mirror in which teachers see themselves in new ways. They draw on teachers' prior knowledge and abilities, and help them construct new approaches of their own, rather than just imitating an instructor. They renew people's enjoyment of their own learning. And they provide space to reconceptualize what learning and teaching can be. Only then are people well equipped—enriched, heartened, drawn into a supportive group—and ready to reflect on the activities and revise their practices accordingly. In the chapters on each curriculum area, we outlined how experts in every field assert that children's learning must be experiential and authentic, reflective and constructivist. Teachers need these ingredients, too.

Furthermore, teachers are a demanding audience, and new ideas must stand up to the rigorous test of everyday application. Therefore, they need to directly experience models of what is possible in the classroom, to end the isolation that cuts them off from alternatives, and to help them work out the many details involved in a new approach.

Teachers need to reflect, to analyze, to compare—to build knowledge and theoretical understandings about their work. Of course, within book covers the knowledge has been there for years—shelves full of studies about classrooms that work and research about what doesn't. However, because research is so often used in the educational world to prove a person's status rather than to really improve schools, teachers often view "theory" with well-justified suspicion. This is just one more reason why they appreciate experiential activity first. Yet when a teacher's natural curiosity has been tapped and she is ready to digest the ideas, it's hard to stop her. Delois Strickland showed us the article about conferencing because the information became meaningful to her.

Approach theory authentically. Some academics consider teachers anti-intellectual and unresponsive to theory. But teachers remember their first year teaching, when all that theory seemed to evaporate under the pressures of the moment, since there was virtually no apprenticeship system to help make the connections. We've seen whole districts where few teachers pursue ideas any further than the immediate workshop sessions. They come, let us entertain them, and return to their classrooms to do what they've always done. These are usually places where the teachers hear extremely mixed signals—for example, paying them to attend a summer workshop, but then discouraging individuals from organizing teacher-led groups to keep the new program going.

But we've also watched as a workshop leader unobtrusively leaves stacks of articles on a table at the end of an in-service session and then initiates discussion with individuals as they enter the room the following week. At first, a few teachers read the pieces, then others grow curious, and ultimately the class organizes small-group "literature circles" to compare ideas about the articles they chose to read.

Good administrators encourage interested teacher groups to explore on their own, read about a new approach, meet informally to discuss it, and try it out, critiquing and adjusting both the ideas and their practice. In some

schools, one can find a rack with new literature on education in the teacher's lounge—even better when the principal leaves Post-it notes with short comments on some of the articles, to show that she is really reading the stuff. Some schools purchase copies of a key book for everyone who participated in a recent workshop on the subject.

As with Delois Strickland, the process is contagious. At first, a teacher tries one or two new strategies; but when it shows promise, she wants to understand more, to extend the practice, and to troubleshoot the parts that aren't working as well. Just as with children: when teachers rediscover their need for new thinking and see results, their hunger for learning bursts forth, even if long-suppressed.

Use classroom consulting and other follow-up to help teachers translate new ideas into realities. Because we know that inquiry and even guided practice do not lead all teachers to use a new approach, schools can schedule ongoing classroom visits by facilitators to observe, coteach lessons, and meet with teachers who ask for help. Once-a-week visits by a consultant for eight to ten weeks can powerfully launch willing teachers on a new trajectory. Team teaching, peer coaching, inquiry groups that study a new approach together and then try it out are all valuable ways to bring teachers into one another's classrooms and help them support each other as they engage new ideas in practice.

Look for the best in teachers. The lockstep curricula and standardized test scores popular in the news media reflect a distrust in the efficacy of individual teachers, an unwillingness to recognize that, finally, learning means teachers in classrooms who understand, support, and challenge each student. School systems, with their detailed curriculum guides, objectives, and standardized tests in each subject area, seem to expect very little initiative from teachers. Truly changing the relationship means asking the teachers to set their own agenda at the beginning of a meeting or in-service session, asking for their analyses of problems in the school or in children's learning, and respecting the realities within their answers, even when we sometimes disagree with them.

When we visit schools, we begin by asking teachers to talk about their successes and challenges, instead of starting right in to lecture about something or to demonstrate a strategy. We see faces change from glazed to surprised to engaged. When asked, people have plenty to say about what's

working and what the obstacles are. Again and again, we observe that when workshops and in-service activities respect teachers—offering ownership and control, immersing them in new perspectives on their own teaching and learning abilities, and providing opportunities to express themselves honestly—most respond with great energy. They start thinking and acting more for themselves. Self-fulfilling prophecy was never more in evidence than here.

5. Sustainability

From the very start, plan ways to ensure that a new effort will endure over the long haul. One of the most troubling phenomena in the world of school reform is that even good, successful new programs rarely last. Visit a school five or ten years after changes were initiated and in all too many cases, there's little or no trace left of the innovation. Leadership changes, and along with it, priorities. New staff don't get the training that the original reformers experienced. Budget cuts wipe out programs that are no longer the new, hot fashion. In the heat of reform, however, it's hard to think about the challenges that will come years later. Some key early steps can help avoid this institutional pattern.

1. Plan for leadership succession. The more successful the program, the more likely the principal or other key administrator will be offered a new, higher-paying job. So train new leaders from the start who understand and support the program and will be ready to take over.
2. Before a new program even begins, bargain for as much autonomy as possible, especially for a school with highly innovative programs, and especially in a large city system. After the effort is launched, it's much harder to gain additional concessions. Large bureaucracies simply aren't designed to support programs that don't fit the mold.
3. Get central office support for the program—in writing. The more the agreement is in the form of a real contract, preferably with an outside partner organization, the more protection you will have. Offer an accountability agreement, a promise to produce specific results within a period of four or five years, to reassure the central administration that you are serious. This helps to keep the whole arrangement clean and clear on all sides.