Does integrated thematic instruction motivate and engage culturally and linguistically diverse students in self-directed learning?

by
Patricia J. Stephens, Ms Ed.
Teacher's Network Leadership Institute Fellow

North Dade Center for Modern Languages
1840 N.W. 157th Avenue
Miami Gardens, FL 33054
Principal: Dr. Maria Castaigne
July 18, 2007

RESEARCH QUESTION

How will the implementation of an integrated thematic curriculum affect the academic progress of culturally and linguistically diverse students in a general education class?

RATIONALE

I took an extended sabbatical from the classroom, fourteen years, to work in the field of early intervention the assessment and referral of infants and children at risk for developmental delay. I returned to the classroom to find that there were several changes that had occurred: First, the students had changed. There were many more culturally and linguistically diverse students. Second, I went from teaching senior high school students and one subject to primary students which involved several subjects, like Math, Reading, Social Studies, Language Arts, and Science.

According to Howard (2007) rapidly changing demographics demand that educators engage in vigorous, ongoing, systemic process of professional development to prepare them to function more effectively in a highly diverse environment. However, this was something, I did not feel adequately prepared. Upon reviewing the primary students' curriculum, I liken it to an example so aptly given by Beane (1995). The classroom curriculum is a pile of jigsaw puzzle pieces that I was told to put together without the benefit of a picture to provide meaning or connections. I realized that the strategies I had learned prior my exodus from the school system in 1986 were insufficient. So, here I was feeling inadequate but knowing I needed to implement a method of instruction which

would bring understanding and meaning to students' whose backgrounds or prior knowledge is often different from the culture in which they presently live. This has often attributed to English language learners, (ELLs), as a group to struggle in school (Short & Echevarria, 2004-2005; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003; White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1999).

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

In my efforts to adjust to the changes, I discovered that I was not alone in dealing with this dilemma. According to Sullo (2007) and Rogers, Ludington, & Graham (1997), teachers struggle with creating lessons and classroom environments that focus and attract students' intrinsic motivation, thereby increasing the possibility that students will actively engage and increase their desire to independently learn. The failure pattern of non engagement creates a cycle that reduces the likelihood of lifelong learning. However, motivating students to engage in self-directed learning in the classroom has been an extreme challenge to teachers. Then, there are presently even greater challenges now. Educators have been forced to implement assessment after assessment as a means of fulfilling mandates as stipulated by the No Child Left Behind Law. The No Child left Behind (NCLB) mandate requires states to meet adequate yearly progress goals to ensure school accountability for student achievement on state tests. Schools that fail to achieve

adequate yearly progress goals face demanding corrective actions, i.e., replacement of school staff, implementation of new curriculum, extension of the school day or academic year, parental choice options, and finally complete reorganization (Abrams & Madaus, 2003). However, those schools whose students score well on standardized tests receive rewards and recognitions. This has often leaded to instruction that is centered on the test and test taking strategies (Guilfoyle, 2006). The implementation of curriculums centered around tests added further confusion to my efforts to make sense of the curriculum and guide my culturally and linguistically diverse students in their efforts to make sense of their learning as well. Recent test scores have proven that teaching to the test increased students' test scores. However, the gains students have made in elementary school appear to dissipate in middle and senior high school.

.RESEARCH

Learners create their own knowledge in a search for meaning and understanding. Knowledge without understanding is limited to the context in which it is learned and is easily forgotten. Learners must actively construct meaning (Brooks, 1990).

Pollock (2007) states in order for the mind to retain information, the mind after spending time steeped in facts about a topic organizes and reorganizes memory points to retrieve and use later in spontaneous, independent applications. In other words, when you read, hear, experience, or see information about a new topic, you will more likely be able to

use that information independently after applying a technique to rehearse it, creating a nonlinguistic representation, or asking questions.

The integration of subject matter helps children perceive learning as a whole. This means that learning is no longer focused on working with separate ideas, issues, and skills. Instead, of trying to figure out how various ideas, issues, and skills are all connected (Atwater, 1995). For, meaning cannot be obtained or neatly extracted from a sentence. Meaning is always context dependent (Restak, 1988). Curricula that is integrated with themes and threads can be easily connected to instruction and assessment that are integrated with multiple intelligences. When the model for integrating the curricula is combined with the model for multiple intelligences, the result is integrated learning (Fogarty & Stoehr, 1995).

Gardner and his colleagues postulated the Theory of Multiple Intelligences. These multiple intelligences include verbal/linguistic, music/rhythmic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, naturalist, intrapersonal, interpersonal (Chapman, 1983). These intelligences have since been increased by additional intelligences. I was familiar with Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences. I included the Theory of Multiple Intelligences as part of the research question in my master's thesis: How will the implementing of an intervention program structured with Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (M.I.) impact the developmental outcome of infants and children at risk for developmental delay?

Forgarty (1991) states to further help the young mind discover “roots running underground whereby contrary and remote things cohere and flower out from one stem’ is the mission of both teachers and learners. Teachers can achieve this goal, along with the Theory of Multiple Intelligences, by integrating the curriculum. This revelation provided a great deal of excitement and hope.

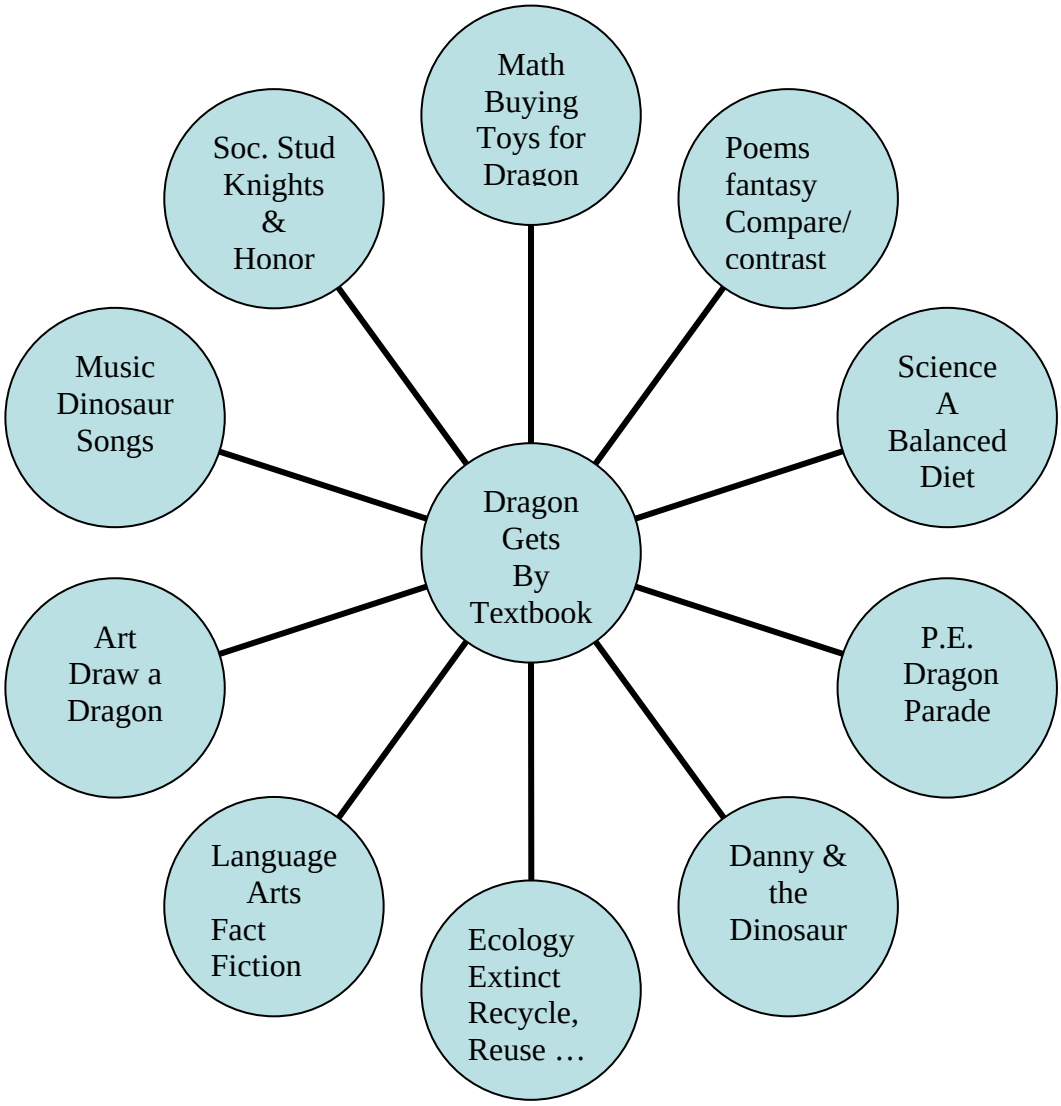
According to Forgarty, there are ten ways to integrate curriculum: fragmented, connected, and nested which occurs within disciplines; sequenced, shared, webbed, threaded, and integrated which occurs across several disciplines; immersed and networked which occurs within and across learners.

Tools

Before initiating an integrated thematic curriculum, a student interest survey and a parent questionnaire were administered the first and second week of school. These surveys were used to assist in determining students’ interests and their particular strength and/or multiple intelligence. In addition, an arithmetic pretest was administered. The Houghton/Mifflin graded word list was also administered to the students. These assessments provided information as to students’ additional strengths and possible weaknesses. I needed to see if students’ interests were compatible with their strengths. Often I have encountered occasions where students wrote that their favorite subject was

math or reading only to discover after testing that they scored extremely deficient in that area. The arithmetic test and graded word list test was administered again at the end and beginning of each grading period.

During the course of implementing the integrated thematic curriculum, I used several trade books, textbooks, and a variety of materials, particularly hands-on and visual. The majority of my students exhibited visual, auditory, and bodily/kinesthetic intelligences. Much of my instructional materials and lessons were structured around these particular intelligences. I also used the visual, auditory, and bodily/kinesthetic intelligences to encourage and strengthen the other intelligences. There were several curriculum integration models from which I could choose. I chose primarily the shared, webbed, nested, and integrated model. The webbed model was the one I used most frequently. It provided the flexibility in which to incorporate all the areas of study. It also made it easy to incorporate MI around trade and textbook stories.


Math
Buying
Toys for
Dragon
Soc. Stud
Knights
&
Honor
Poems
fantasy
Compare/
contrast
Music
Dinosaur
Songs
Science
A
Balanced
Diet
Dragon
Gets
By
Textbook
Art
Draw a
Dragon
P.E.
Dragon
Parade
Language
Arts
Fact
Fiction
Ecology
Extinct
Recycle,
Reuse …
Danny &
the
Dinosaur

RESULTS

Implementing an integrated thematic instruction yielded several outcomes. Students standardized test scores were equivalent to those students who did not receive integrated thematic instruction. (See Appendix A) An additional benefit of the integrated thematic instruction was that students engaged in independent self-directed learning. (See Appendix B) As students take their learning and extend it outside the classroom, they obtained additional opportunities to make connections between lessons learned in the classroom and their home environment. This action helped students to understand that learning does not have to be confine to the classroom or only in an institution of learning.

ANA.LYSIS

Results indicated that by implementing an integrated thematic curriculum students received additional background knowledge. This aided students in developing additional interests and connections to other subjects. As the students actively demonstrate self-directed learning , they were able to use this knowledge to successfully perform task requiring critical thinking, like standardized tests i.e., SAT.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the outcomes of this action research, it is recommended that the implementation of an integrated thematic curriculum be used in the classroom. It is also recommended that collaboration between teachers and media center specialists be encouraged. Initially, I purchased books, visual aids, magazines, big books, and etc. I later discovered that the materials I needed were often present in the school library. As I collaborated more with the media specialist, I obtained an invaluable partner in my efforts to implement a more literature enriched thematic curriculum. I would also recommend that there be an increase support from school districts, school administrators, state and local governments for an integrated thematic curriculum.. There are several established scope and sequences or objectives. These are not always compatible. For example, the new state approve textbook first unit is on plants while the state's scope and sequence first unit is matter and its properties. The implementation of an integrated thematic curriculum added in the coherence and connection that is lacking in the present curriculums (Stephens, 2007).

The implementation of an integrated thematic curriculum as determined by this action research encouraged students to build on the background knowledge they obtained. This curriculum strengthened previously learned skills, increased students' critical thinking skills, and self-directed learning. The integrated thematic curriculum

also aided in creating a coherent curriculum which could be implemented affectively throughout all disciplines.

Patricia J. Stephens
North Dade Center for Modern Languages
1840 N.W. 157th Street
Miami Gardens, FL 33054
Mail Code: 5131 Telephone: 305-625-3885
E-mail: pjstephens42@yahoo.com
Principal: Dr. Maria Castaigne

Appendix B

Anecdotal Accountants

Dragon Gets By (Dragons and Dinosaurs)

Christopher (ESOL level 4) would often ask to borrow dinosaur books to read at home. After being promoted, he continued his interest in dinosaurs. He reported that upon several visits to the bookstore he would ask his mother to buy him a particular book on dinosaurs. As the years continue, Christopher would often continue to share information he's learned about dinosaurs. During his self directed learning, he practiced phonemic awareness and reading comprehension. He became proficient at reading the names of the dinosaurs. This skill enabled him to do well on test involving reading nonsense words.

Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy

During a lesson on fact, fiction, and fantasy, Greek and Roman mythology was introduced and studied. As a result, Camilo each time he visited the school library would check out illustrated children's' books on Greek and Roman myths. One day an animated movie, Odysseus, was shown in class. One of the students watching the movie informed me that Camilo was telling him things that were going to happen in the movie before he saw it happen. Camilo through his self-directed learning was able to practice

and demonstrate sequencing. He also demonstrated recall and comprehension. For he understood and recalled the events which occurred to Odysseus and his crew.

The School Mural

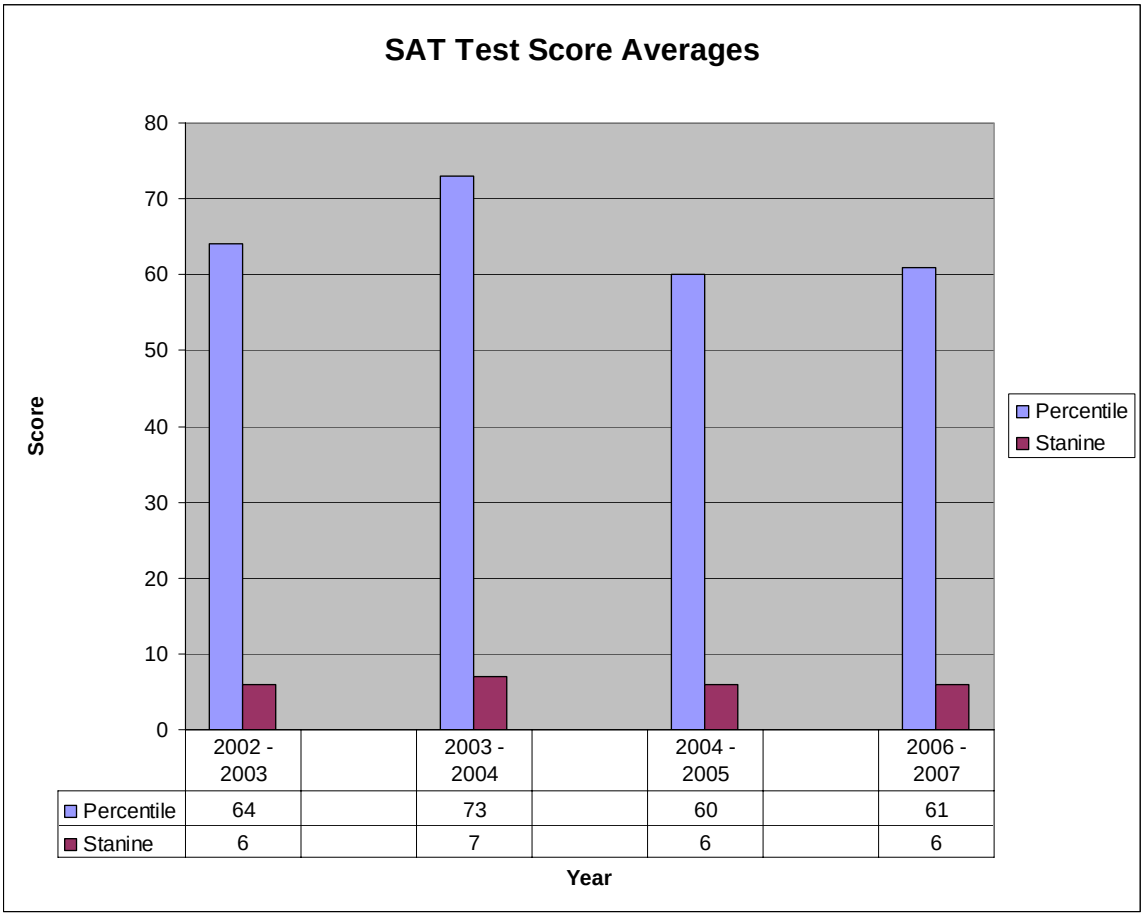
During the story, *The School Mural*, students toured the murals on the school's campus. They were also introduced to the parts of the newspaper and the Five W's and H. They were informed that reporters when writing a story look for the following information: Who is the story about? What happened? When did the story happen? Where did the story happen? Why did it happen? How did it happen? During this time the Virginia Tech tragic shootings occurred. I mentioned I knew that they were hearing a lot about this story. Reporters have provided information about the who, what, when, where, how. However, they can't provide information about why the tragedy happened. Days later as the Virginia Tech story continue to unfold. Jason said,"Ms. Stephens I know why the man killed all those people. They were picking on him." Jason took a lesson he learned in the classroom and applied it outside the classroom.

Ants

Lychna upon completing a unit on insects and arachnids, she would checked out books from the school library on insects and spiders. Just as she did for this unit, she did consistently with the other units/themes studied in class. She would check

out books on the subject and read them. She would then share the information she learned with me and the class. This act of checking out books on subjects studied in class was consistently done by many other students. Each time the students would find and read a book on a theme or topic discussed in class they would it with others.

Appendix A


SAT Test Score Averages
Score
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Percentile
Stanine
2002 - 2003
2003 - 2004
2004 - 2005
2006 - 2007
Percentile 64 73 60 61
Stanine 6 7 6 6
Year

References

Abrams, L.M. & Madaus, G.F. (2003). The lessons of high-stakes testing, *Educational Leadership, 61*, 31-35.

Atwater, M.(1995). The cross-curricular classroom. *Scope, 19*(2), 42 – 45.

Beane, J.A.(Ed.) *Toward a coherent curriculum*, 1995 Yearbook of the Association for for Supervision and Curriculum Development, VA: ASCD.

Brooks, J. (1990). Teachers and students: Constructivists forging new connections. *Educational Leadership, 47*(5), 68 – 71.

Chapman, C. (1983). *If the shoe fits…How to develop multiple intelligences in the classroom.* Illinios: IRI/SkyLight

Forgarty, R. (1991). *The mindful school how to integrate the curricula.* Illinois: IRI/Skylight

Fogarty, R. & Stoehr, J.(1995).*Integrating curricula with multiple intelligences teams, themes, and threads.* Illinois: IRI/SkyLight.

Guilfoyle, C. (2000). NCLB: Is there life beyond testing? *Educational Leadership, 64*, 8-13.

Howard, G.R. (2007). As diversity grows, so must we. *Educational Leadership, 64*, 16-22.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *Digest for education statistics tables and figures.* Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office. Available http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d02/dt066.asp.

Pollock, J.E. (2007). *Improving students learning one teacher at a time*. Virginia: Association of Supervisor Curriculum Development.

Restak, R.M. (1988). *The Mind*. New York: Bantam Books.

Rogers, S., Ludington, J., Graham, S. (1997). *Motivation and learning: A teacher's Guide to building experiment for learning and igniting the drive for quality.* Colorado: Peak Learning Systems.

Short, D. & Echevarria, J. (December 2004/January 2005). Teacher skills to support English language learners, *Educational Leadership, 62,* 8-13.

Snow, C. & Biancarosa, G. (2003). *Adolescent literacy development among English Language learners.* New York: The Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Stephens, P. J. (2007). *Integrated thematic instruction connects disjointed and incoherent curriculums*.Unpublished literature review, Nova Southeastern University, Florida.

Sullo, B., (2007). *Activating the desire to learn*. Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans (1999). *Latinos in education: Early childhood, elementary, undergraduate, graduate*. Washington, D.C., Author.

Appendix C

Art

Crazy About Art by Hirsch
Hokusai
Printing Activity
Step-by-Step Manga by Krefta
Introduction to Japanese comic books
Anime
Pokemon
Sumi-e by Syoko
Japanese Brush Painting
Kabuki theatre
Venn Diagram: How is the Kabuki
and Shakespearean Theaters similar
and different from each other?

Social Studies

A Day In Japan by Moreton and Berger
Children in Japan attend school Monday
to Friday and even on Saturdays. Some
people believe American students should
also attend school on Saturdays.
What benefits could American students
get from having Saturday schools?
How My Parents Learned to Eat? By Ina Friedman
How did the main characters parents'
learn to accept and enjoy each others culture?

Culminating Activity

Kinestic Interest Centers (KIC) TM: Six centers will be set up in the classroom. Kinestic Interest Centers will contain five students. Each KIC session will be 12 to 15 minutes. Each group will be given 12 to 15 minutes in which to complete their assignment before going on to the next center.

Center one each student will draw a Manga comic book character and jointly write a story. Center two students will as a group write a sentence using Japanese characters in brush painting.. Center three students will as a group make their own layered block print. Center four students as a group will write a haiku. Center five students will complete *A Journey to Japan*. Center five students as a group will read *Postcards* from *Japan* by Dawson. After the reading, they will complete the learned portion of the K-W-L chart.

Physical Education

Martial Arts
Children's Day celebration
Students make carp kites and
then fly them

Language Arts and Reading

Students will write Haiku poetry. A Japanese poem
that is usually 17 syllables long in three unrhymed
lines.. The lines are five syllables, seven syllables,
and five syllables (Foley, Lud, and Power, 1981).
Japanese Folktales read aloud
Then students will write their own story using Japanese
Characters (Johns, 1993)
Students will read, *Life in Japan*, and then answer
the ten questions below.

Music

Teacher reads aloud *What Talent! Midori:Violinist.*
Teacher then plays her music. Students write reflective
responses.
Students will listen to traditional, Ikuta and Yamada,
and contemporary Japanese music. Then they will
write reflective responses.
Karaoke
Why do you think karaoke is more popular in
Japan than in the US?

Science

Gardens: The students will be introduced to the types of gardens they would see in Japan. They will then take a video field trip to the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens www.morikami.org.
Environmental Issues:
Population, Production, and Pollution
Endangered Species

Mathematics

Class reading *Goods from Near and Far*
(Harcourt Horizons pp. 298-303)
After reading sections in the Social Studies text, students will hunt throughout the classroom for information the name of the manufacturers and graph the in order determine the number products made in other countries.