

Integrated arts education cultivates creativity, critical thinking, and holistic understanding by seamlessly combining various art forms with traditional subjects, enriching students' learning experiences and fostering well-rounded individuals.

# Weaving It All Together

**Arianna Ross**  
*Story Tapestries, Inc.*

**Susan Snyder**  
*Arts Education IDEAS, LLC*



# The Arts, Literacy, Adults, and Kids

.....



arts learning in early childhood is natural! In this article, we look at the why and how of established practices, and an effective way to weave together elements that lead to success for all students, including those with different needs, learning styles, and circumstances — an approach that addresses post-COVID needs.

Ask any teacher, parent, or child. Children and the arts are made for each other. The arts are important for young children because the brain is naturally wired to benefit from them. There are areas of the brain waiting for experiences that will move excited neurons into receptive clusters. The more experiences children have, the more capacity they develop for learning through poetry, dance and movement, music, visual art, storytelling, and drama.

## Children's Brains Are Ready to Learn

Eric Jensen<sup>1</sup> coined the phrase, “We are neuron farmers.” This aligns with our daily observations. The more students are exposed to different tools of learning, the deeper and more effective their







ability to grasp intricate and essential concepts from an early age. For example, in 2019 at Fernwood Elementary School, Story Tapestries participants witnessed how 4-year-olds were able to apply their understanding of the water cycle using dance, theater, and visual arts to represent what they learned.

We also know from brain experts, such as collaborators through NeuroArts Blueprint project<sup>2</sup> and Dr. Dee Joy Coulter,<sup>3</sup> that just like plants, predestined neurons that are not nourished with experiences die, or migrate to other more stimulated brain areas. We need to nourish the neurons inclined toward sound, image, movement, and story, which are exactly what is needed to understand language, literacy, mathematics, logic, and science. They build the capacity for communicating what is learned and felt.

The arts also provide opportunities to process, understand, and share feelings — the social-emotional part of the teaching-learning equation. Let's explore one concept at a time as we build the case that the arts nourish our students' social-emotional learning and academic growth.

## Why the Arts?

If the arts are natural ways for every child to learn, wired in from birth and connected to all parts of the curriculum, then it is important to make the arts part of every day, woven or integrated with other learning. Better yet, what if the arts became the delivery system for content and social-emotional learning? What if every teacher had the tools to plan integration of the arts — all of them — so they become part of the way everyone naturally behaves, responds, creates, and connects ideas for *total learning*<sup>™</sup>? What if we all knew how to plan and deliver multi-modal, multi-sensory, hands-on, brain-on activities that pattern the brain for learning?

## The arts:

- Are dance/movement, visual art, storytelling/drama, and music
- Are communication modes and forms of literacy
- Are inclusive and culturally responsive; everyone is born with the capacity to communicate in and through drama, story, visual arts, movement, and music

- Build thinking capacity, particularly during critical brain development before 8 years old
- Provide pathways to learning across the curriculum
- Lead to “flow,” balancing challenge and relaxation to reach an optimal learning state; children without arts exposure often exhibit socially unacceptable behaviors, for which they are punished, because the learning environment does not meet their needs
- Are learned through four artistic processes: creating, presenting/performing, responding, and connecting.

## Weaving Learning Through the Arts

The brain seeks pattern and complexity. The arts provide patterns and metaphors for understanding in all subjects. Howard Gardner<sup>4</sup> developed his Theory of Multiple Intelligences to include linguistic, logical/mathematical, musical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, and existential ways of knowing and communicating. Gardner’s work, based on observation of how people learn and know, identifies the arts, social-emotional skills, and basic classroom disciplines as connected ways of knowing. This theory provides a broader view of each art form as a way of communicating — a language with its own vocabulary, symbols, and meanings.

The icons we use to show the arts disciplines also reflect the ways that children learn information. We can separate the categories or subjects for discussion, but they are woven together in learning and life.



Linguistic (speaking, listening, reading, writing, literacy, story, poetry, theater)



Kinesthetic (dance, gesture, locomotor, non-locomotor, coordination, touch)



Auditory (sound, words, music, listening, speaking, beat-boxing, instruments)



Visual (spatial, reading, visual art, image, geometric/numerical patterns)

## Social-Emotional Learning

Like the arts, social-emotional learning is important for young children’s growth, encouraging their development of healthy identities and supportive, trusting relationships.

Research informs us that many children today have trauma-related and bias-related issues that impact their self-concept and ability to learn.

Children who feel threatened, uncomfortable, or unsuccessful struggle to learn. In contrast, intentionally enabled children are curious and interact with one another and the curriculum content as successful learners. Teachers and other adults make a huge difference when they believe children can succeed and encourage every child to believe it themselves. The arts provide pathways to this goal.

CASEL<sup>5</sup> provides a roadmap for social-emotional growth through five competencies:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Responsible decision-making
- Relationship skills
- Societal relationships.

Teachers involved in quality arts integration programs report feeling amazed by the immediate and continued student engagement they observe. It’s not a trick. Children’s brains are wired to respond to active engagement in and through the arts. While it will be important to learn how to manage a classroom of active children, the magic begins here and continues to build trust and collaboration between teachers and students.

## A Few Tips

- **Begin by Listening.** Listen to students and provide activities where they need to listen to you and to each other. Listen to all the ways they communicate: their words, body language, sounds, images, and play. They will tell you what they know and want to know. They will tell you, too, what they don’t know or misunderstand.

Start with a piece of music. Have the students lay down and tell you the story they hear. Next, have them stand up and move across the room using locomotor motion to cross space. Remember to use the music as the key to stop and start the movement. Finally, have the students draw the story of the music. [https://youtu.be/mCYgXtd\\_Oog](https://youtu.be/mCYgXtd_Oog)

- **Evaluate Your Directions.** Are they clear? Are they unambiguous? Do they ask for some action by the listener? Do they have more than one step? If so, break it down and put the steps on the board, in pictures and/or words.



- **Build Self-Control Skills.** Build the skills before asking children to use them. If they are using their voices, help them learn about speaking, whispering, singing, and calling voices, so they can use the appropriate ones to speak to one another in different spaces. If they are moving through shared space, have them practice moving one at a time, then just a few at a time, and finally all together without touching. Give them each an imaginary magic bubble that they can pull around themselves when they move, being careful that it doesn't burst.
- **Focus on Storytelling.** Invent, tell, listen to, read (words and/or pictures), and act out stories, using costumes, sound effects, movement, puppets, and pictures. "Delivering content — in any class — through a story has positive effects on your students' information retention. . . . [The] desire . . . to hear books read aloud and repeatedly requesting [ones] they know well enough to predict . . . encompasses powerful brain drives that become memory enhancers."<sup>6</sup>

A great activity to build up self-control is to guide them to physically create their personal space, the island where they tell stories physically, vocally, and through art. <https://youtu.be/UogOc315gxY>

You can use many art forms to tell stories. Visual art is a great way to activate the writer in your students. <https://youtu.be/eJ3odRCYXX0>

Arts strategies that stimulate the ears, eyes, body, and brain can be used to deliver any concept or skill in





any discipline/subject — literacy, math, science, health — while building social-emotional skills.

## Literacy

Literacy is often described as developing the skills of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and thinking using words, with a goal of learning to communicate. While it might be argued that music, visual art, dance, and drama are equally important languages, current school and center curricula are not organized around that perception.

Literacy is a huge focus of school curricula. In early learning, the focus is on learning to read, because children who can't read by 3rd grade are less likely to succeed in school and life, with four times the drop-out rate before the end of high school, and they struggle with reading to learn.<sup>7</sup>

The good news is that we can weave literacy, social-emotional learning, and the arts together right away! The arts and social-emotional skills and understandings become the strategies and tools used to deliver any curriculum content. In the classroom, when the arts and curricula objectives are met seamlessly with social-emotional learning goals, students thrive.

For example, instead of just reading a book, identify *power words* first — key words students need to learn to be successful. A *power word* could be *happy*, *glad*, *excited*, or *ecstatic*. After the words are identified, act them out, sing them, create a rhythm with their syllables, dance them, and draw them. Tell the story with your voice, tell it with your body by acting it out or dancing it out, share it through puppetry, and show it through drawing.

## Arts Integration

Through arts integration, as described above, we weave a deeper connection between what is learned and how it is taught. If we choose a theme such as “part and whole” and explore it through the arts, learning can be enriched and engaging across the curriculum. Advocating for quality arts integration is advocating for students who use all the learning capacity that they possess.



Most early childhood certification programs do not require or even introduce arts-integration strategies. You may not have been introduced to any — yet!

Story Tapestries brings arts integration to early learning, with special attention to students who have different learning styles and needs — such as learning or language differences, mental health needs, effects of poverty such as language deficits, and so on. Children are more likely to want to learn when they feel safe, trust grownups and fellow students, and have the confidence to take risks that lead to engagement.

Our goal is to provide arts integration strategies to help teachers plan developmentally appropriate, targeted activities that engage children in learning. Our approach includes teacher professional development, student model lessons, as well as family and community engagement.

Arts integration is planned intentionally. School administration develops common goals with the team and agrees to allocate sufficient time and dedicate events to honor teacher and student needs. Teachers participate in professional development that builds skills and understandings, as well as strategies for immediately engaging children. Some of the professional development is adults only, while some incorporates classroom observation and reflection. Teachers are guided to understand the arts strategies, then apply them (at first with a mentor) to upcoming curriculum goals. They also reflect on lesson successes





and learn from mistakes. At the same time, families and caretakers are included in activities that allow them to see children engaged and learning.

Story Tapestries also provides online opportunities for learning, including on-demand courses, in-person classes, and videos of specific strategies like the art of Steady Beat (<https://youtu.be/yRaCnf5P7DI>) or Magic Bubble ([https://youtu.be/TRxwAXVOB\\_k](https://youtu.be/TRxwAXVOB_k)). You can find more learning opportunities at [www.storytapestries.org](http://www.storytapestries.org) or by reaching out to Story Tapestries at [administrator@storytapestries.org](mailto:administrator@storytapestries.org).

## The Takeaway

The arts are not about finding one right answer; rather, they open our eyes and ears to many possible answers. Through the positivity of arts integration, children and teachers are happier, attendance is up for both groups, families feel more included, and ultimately academic performance rises.

A big takeaway from the arts-integration approach is the value of weaving together the ways of knowing, bravely allowing children to actively engage in higher order thinking on a regular basis and make connections between experiences — just like we intentionally planned. Be ready for discoveries you haven't even thought of yet, and for a classroom busily buzzing with excitement about learning how to learn.

## About the Authors:

**Arianna Ross** is the CEO of Story Tapestries, Inc. She has been a Master Teaching Artist for over 24 years and organizes arts-integration residencies for early learning centers, schools and districts, organizations, and cultural centers across the United States. She invites you to explore [www.storytapestries.org](http://www.storytapestries.org), and be in touch for more information about how to get started with arts integration.

**Dr. Susan (Sue) Snyder** is a career-long arts-integration specialist. She has taught children and consulted with teachers/schools/districts/media/and companies, and developed, published, and supported evaluation of programs. She is the president of Arts Education IDEAS, LLC, and is a Story Tapestries board member.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Jensen, E. (2010). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it*. ASCD. [www.goodreads.com/book/show/51928932-teaching-with-poverty-in-mind](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/51928932-teaching-with-poverty-in-mind)

<sup>2</sup>NeuroArts Blueprint project: <https://neuroartsblueprint.org/about/the-neuroarts-blueprint-initiative/>

<sup>3</sup>Coulter, D. J. (2014). *Original mind: Uncovering your natural brilliance*. Sound True; Coulter, D. J. (n.d.). *Embrace your brain podcast*. <https://embraceyourbrain.com/>

<sup>4</sup>Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind*. Harvard Business School Press; Gardner, H. (2007). *Five minds for the future*. Harvard Business School Press.

<sup>5</sup>CASEL. (2020). *SEL Framework*. <https://casel.org/casel-sel-framework-11-2020/>

<sup>6</sup>Willis, J. (2017). *The neuroscience of narrative and memory*. Edutopia. [www.edutopia.org/article/neuroscience-narrative-and-memory/](http://www.edutopia.org/article/neuroscience-narrative-and-memory/)

<sup>7</sup>Barshay, J. (2022). *Proof points: Third graders struggling the most to recover in reading after the pandemic: Analysis of 7 million students across the country sounds alarm for young readers*. The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/proof-points-third-graders-struggling-the-most-to-recover-in-reading-after-the-pandemic/>

## Disclosure Statement:

The authors are employees or board members of Story Tapestries.

