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by John Sikula, Oscar McKnight & Gary Zoldesy



Background Information

Previous studies have shown a link between arts experiences and later performance (Rochford). The earlier the "effective nurture" is applied, the more effective it will be. This is why the Artful Living Project chose preschoolers as its target audience.

The project is in its third year, involving more preschoolers each year. During the first year, 15 students participated. In year two, 60 students participated. In the coming year, the project will double in size, with support from Massillon City Schools already having been pledged.

Introduction

The Massillon Artful Living Project (ALP) was created to immerse developing minds in the fine arts and to enhance the creativity, social skills, and academic achievement of preschool children. The ALP is a multi-phase, educational and collaborative program sponsored by several community organizations. It targets children whose home environmental and economic restrictions diminish their fine arts opportunities.

The project involves:

- fine arts immersion over an extended period of time;
- arts providers' lessons to reinforce teachers' daily lesson plans;
- lessons taught by professionally trained artists from the Ananda Center (movement and dance), the Canton Symphony Orchestra, the Massillon Museum, and the Massillon Public Library; and
- consulting services from the Stark Education Partnership, the Stark Educational Service Center, and Ashland University.

The Artful Living Project is supported by not only the Massillon Museum, which is the host organization, but also it is funded by the:

Charity Rotch School Fund of the Kendal Foundation
Martha Holden Jennings Foundation
Massillon City Schools
Massillon Rotary Foundation
Ohio Arts Council

Project Phases

Phase one involved preschoolers in fine arts activities four days a week. The Massillon Museum provided a session on visual arts on Mondays; the Massillon Public Library delivered a session in literature on Tuesdays; the Canton Symphony was responsible on Wednesdays; and the Ananda Center offered a session in movement on Thursdays.

Initial findings found both the experimental and control groups conceptually equal and starting from the same point on Academic Achievement, Creativity, and Social Skills. Data later indicated that the Experimental Group had the greatest proportional increase in Academic Achievement. Although across-the-board statistically significant effects did not occur for the pilot program, individual students generally made significant personal gains (Sikula, 2009).

Phase II of the project involved parents in their children's creative and academic development. Children spend more time at home than they do in school. The parent-involvement phase of the ALP: hosted monthly family meetings; offered arts classes for all children in the families involved; presented helpful information to parents on the topics of wellness, nutrition, local social services, and more; and provided free art supplies to families for home use. Eight families were involved.

Total outcome scores on Academic Achievement, Creativity, and Social Skills tended to be higher for the Family Participation Group. Also, Academic Achievement performance scores were significantly higher in the morning classes (Sikula, 2010).

At the end of year two, the experimental classes appeared to improve over 30 percent in creativity. To help control variables, in year two all the pre and post-tests were given by the same assessor.

Some Positive Results Evident:

The observational responses from teachers, parents, administrators, and observers have been generally positive and enthusiastic. The people directly involved in the ALP are committed to its success. There is enough evidence collected to justify not only program continuance, but also expansion.

- The ALP participants have recorded academic improvement through the state mandated "Get It, Got It, Go!" evaluation.
- At the end of the first semester, data from the teacher developed test and Get It, Got It, Go! showed about a 10% improvement of the experimental class over the control class. In creativity, the experimental classes improved over 30 percent.
- Year one project analysis indicated that a larger group of participants was needed to confirm suspected gains. This was accomplished.
- Year one of the ALP had 15 preschoolers involved.
- Year two of the project had 45 participants in the experimental group and 15 participants in the control group.
- Phase II feedback in year two from 8 families is very positive, and it indicates a desire to expand this phase of the effort.
- The project has created a tracking system for measuring achievement performance throughout the students' academic careers.

The Artful Living Project promotes a collaborative effort among community organizations and the public schools. The type of cooperation in evidence is a model for other agencies wishing to change the status quo and/or to show positive results for explicit, mutual goals. The good news includes that this program is replicable in other school districts and communities.

The Future

Continued ALP implementation and assessment are warranted. The Massillon City Schools, area organizations and funding agencies agree; this next academic year, 2010-11, the effort is being expanded to include six classrooms and more families. The anecdotal feedback from parents indicated that their involvement was critical in moving the preschoolers' overall performance trend line upwards.

Conclusion

The Massillon Artful Living Project is in its third year of assessed implementation. The data analyses to date support program expansion. The ALP model appears to provide the kind of collaborative example and effort needed to address serious societal problems, such as intergenerational poverty. Objective data analyses have supported the program (Sikula, 2009 and Sikula, 2010). Also, subjective feedback provided by teachers, parents, administrators and community arts providers has been overwhelmingly positive.

Surely, the project remains a work in progress, but improvements are being made yearly in not only the research design, but also in the validated results of the effort.

References

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