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An Introduction to the Performing Arts

A young child sits at the piano for the first time, running his hands across the keys, kicking his legs beneath him as they dangle off the bench.

As the curtain rises, a family sits together in the center aisle to watch the opening night performance of a new play.

Two sisters dance together in their bedroom, creating their own choreography to their favorite music, twirling and swirling to the sounds around them.

A cast of children stand anxious and excited on stage in the bright spotlights, adorned in colorful costumes.

These vignettes are examples of music, theater, dance, and musical theater—artistic genres that are individually and collectively defined as the performing arts.

The performing arts are a vital and necessary part of our culture and society and exist in many formal and informal settings. Live

performances in large arenas, our favorite songs and recordings, television shows, community theater productions, and informal dance halls all provide venues for experiencing music, theater, dance, and musical theater. We cherish the opportunity to watch our favorite play or musical, sing our favorite songs, or dance to our favorite music. The performing arts are an important part of our lives, our communication, and our self-expression. These arts forms are categorized as such because of how each embodies the idea of practice to performance: the process of experiencing, studying, watching, or performing a piece of music, script, or choreography.

When you think of *performance*, what comes to mind? Is it a soundstage with your favorite performer, a dance club, an elementary school production? Performance is simply defined as *an event that involves a group of people*, but this is not always equated to a live performance, in front of an audience of thousands of individuals. A performance can be personal and intimate or social and culturally influenced. While the performing arts are traditionally relegated to intense years of formal study and practice, recent years have shown a resurgence of interest in younger participants who are acting, singing, and dancing in various venues.

Popular culture has played a large part in this interest in the performing arts for all individuals regardless of background knowledge, training, and talent, as the most predominant societal view is one that encourages the idea that *anyone* can sing, act, and dance. Reality shows, audition opportunities, and community performances invite universal participation. Interestingly, recent trends have also documented a resurgence of participation from school-aged children within school, community, and professional musical theater (Rajan, in press).

While the performing arts in our communities are thriving with participation and performances, these arts forms are notably absent in our schools. If the performing arts are an important component of our lives and learning, how come they are not a stronger part of the educational curriculum and core? The answer is simply what most teachers recognize on a daily basis—a strong push for accountability and testing, which has substantially diminished the arts in our schools. The further absence of teaching artists and arts specialists in schools often places the responsibility on classroom teachers to find creative ways to integrate the arts, to foster artistic experiences in the classroom that will positively impact learning.

This common solution is an unfair and unrealistic expectation to add to the already high demands that classroom teachers face. Furthermore, teachers are not always confident with teaching the

arts, and a multitude of challenges exist with arts integration such as securing resources, props, and supplies for these various experiences. Even if the performing arts belong in our schools, the questions frequently asked by educators and administrators are *why should we teach the arts*, and *what are students learning?*

It is an expectation in the field of early childhood and elementary education today that children in preprimary settings are already learning in an environment that is heavily focused on exploration, hands-on learning, and artistic experiences. More so, it is in the elementary classroom that children further need creative venues that encourage self-confidence, self-expression, and collaboration—personal and social skills that are an integral component of learning and development.

For many years, children have commonly studied music or dance in private studio settings, pursuing these art forms as extracurricular activities. Much of the current research on artistic learning focuses on integrated, in-school experiences, where the term *dance* is often used synonymously with movement, and the term *theater* is used synonymously with drama activities. Regardless of name, research has documented how children gain not only artistic skills, but improve academically, personally, and socially through the arts (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 2000; Horowitz & Rajan, 2007; Rajan, 2009, 2011; Upitis & Smithrim, 2003).

Integrated arts are simply defined as the connection between one or more academic subjects (such as math, science, social studies, and language arts) and one or more performing arts form (music, theater, dance, and musical theater). Through observations, interviews, and students' reflections on and perceptions of their experiences, educators have documented how children's participation as singers, actors, and dancers positively impacts their learning. Some findings include demonstrated growth in self-confidence and self-expression, new friendships with peers, and augmented connections between arts learning and academic subject matter (Burton, et al., 2000; Feay-Shaw, 2001; Rajan, 2009; Roberts, 2007).

This book addresses the various needs and challenges teachers face today and provides a resource of research-based, practical ideas for integrating music, theater, dance, and musical theater into grades K–5. The book is organized into three sections building on the definitions of the performing arts as artistic genres and disciplines of study as presented in this introduction.

The first section, Chapters 1 and 2, provides an overview of the book and some general theories and practices for the integration of the performing arts into classroom activities.

The second section provides detailed portraits of each of the performing arts forms presented through descriptions drawn from research and literature, examples from the classroom and community, and complete lesson plans for integrating the performing arts into math, science, social studies, and language arts. The lesson plans include specific suggestions with learning objectives and appropriate methods for assessing learning in the performing arts and related content areas. While there are often specific suggestions or topics for music, theater, dance, and musical theater excerpts provided within lessons, these topics can easily be modified to best suit your own curricular needs.

In order to provide a wide range of ideas for each subject area and maintain brevity in the text, each chapter in this section includes 16 lesson plans. While each grade level is not necessarily represented, the range in topics and flexibility in the lessons is intended as a springboard for your own teaching contexts, a vehicle from which you will build your own activities fused with the performing arts.

Cognitive skills and brain-based learning are also of great importance to educators and often provide a means of justifying the arts in the classroom. For this reason, each chapter has a table that outlines the personal, social, and artistic skills that are developed through the integrated performing arts lessons. Each chapter also includes a description of the process of planning arts-integrated lessons and a section entitled Building Artistic Vocabulary that highlights key terms in each of the artistic genres. Finally, this section includes opportunities for reflecting on the meaning of the performing arts in our own lives as audience members, active participants, students, and teachers.

It was most important to ensure that relevant standards were also addressed and discussed for each performing arts form. Although each state has specific early learning standards that are required for developing and implementing lessons, throughout this book you will find reference to the Early Childhood Standards for teachers in K–3 settings, developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC); the Elementary Standards for teachers in grades 4–5, developed by the Association of Childhood Education International (ACEI); and the Common Core State Standards for Math and Language Arts (CC).

The National Standards for Arts Education (music, theater, and dance) were developed in 1994 as a product of the Consortium of National Arts Education Association. The standards are found and housed within the individual arts organizations—The National Association for Music Education (NAFME), the American Alliance

for Theatre and Education (AATE), and the National Dance Education Organization (NDEO).

Individually, these standards represent the requirements and benchmarks deemed most important for the arts and children's education in each respective field. Collectively, they present a comprehensive approach to integrating the performing arts in a way that maintains the integrity of the arts and addresses the needs and challenges of educators in various settings.

Please note that while the appropriate standards are noted at the beginning of each lesson, the list of referenced standards can be found in the appendix of this book. For a *complete* list of all the standards, please contact or refer to the appropriate organization—correlating websites and links are also included in the appendix.

The third and final section of this book delves deeper into building and sustaining integrated performing arts experiences within the school, community, and professional settings. Finally, I challenge each of you to become artistically reflective educators, in that you continue to recognize your own artistic experiences (both good and bad!) to shape the performing arts experiences that you will create and implement with your students, within your classrooms. With these various resources and references, it is my hope that the performing arts will find a relevant and meaningful place in your own curriculum and teaching contexts.