

Introduction

This started out as a very different kind of book. The research project described in these pages originally set out to examine arts instruction in ten case study schools with the goal of identifying strategies that educators could use to improve schools serving economically disadvantaged communities. We thought we would share the lessons learned from the case studies in a how-to manual for school leaders. What we found at the schools we studied surprised us, however, and demanded an altogether different kind of book.

The lessons from the schools were not only a matter of strategies, programs, and procedures, but a more complex, nuanced, and profound story about how the arts change schools. We found that the arts connected schools with their communities and enabled them to create powerful contexts and conditions for learning—contexts and conditions which we came to call *third space*. It is this latter story that we tell in this book.

The Research Question

In spring 2001 the Arts Education Partnership (AEP) posed the question, “How do the arts contribute to the improvement of schools that serve economically disadvantaged communities?” In summer 2001 Dick Deasy invited me to join the AEP staff to design a research project to explore this question, beginning what was to become a four-year journey.

As is typical of work at AEP, the project unfolded as a series of collaborations. AEP is a coalition of over a hundred arts and education organizations nationwide, connecting researchers, practitioners, and policy makers at the forefront of arts and education. When AEP designs its projects, it draws upon the expertise of these groups in designing work of a high standard that will be useful and relevant to those working in the field.

A Wide Lens

Our first step was to design a framework for the research. We did so with the advice of a group of researchers who had recently completed a compendium with AEP that analyzed and synthesized research studies examining links between learning in the arts and student academic and social development. This compendium, *Critical Links*, and the work of the individual researchers illuminated the types of outcomes that we might expect to see associated with arts learning. We carefully considered the ramifications that this set of outcomes could have for our case study schools.

We deliberately chose a wide lens through which to look at the connections between the arts programs in the schools and school quality. Judgments about school quality frequently rest primarily on the scores of students on standardized tests in reading and mathematics—an important but limited measure. We were interested in taking a wider and deeper look, incorporating standardized test scores into a more comprehensive picture of a school's success.

Our research advisors provided guidance as we developed a diverse set of indicators of school quality that included students' academic, personal, and social development; teacher efficacy, satisfaction, and professional growth; school culture and climate; and community involvement. These indicators became the basis for the questions that guided our interviews and observations when we conducted our field research.

The Case Study Schools

AEP's partner organizations nominated possible case study sites—schools with outstanding arts programs, in which at least fifty percent of the students were from economically disadvantaged families. When possible, we sought schools that had been the subject of other research or evaluation studies that provided evidence of the quality of their arts programs, or that had been singled out as highly successful by national or state recognition programs. Our goal was not to demonstrate that the schools deserved their reputations but rather to explore how and why the schools believed that their arts programs were crucial to their

success, and what strategies had been essential to the implementation of the programs.

We developed a list of schools that met the criteria we had established, looking closely for overlap in the recommendations. We conducted phone interviews with school district personnel where the most promising sites were located and with the principals, staff, and community partners of the individual schools. Based on these conversations, we selected a set of ten schools for further consideration. The schools included were elementary, middle, and high schools in geographically diverse urban and rural communities.

Representatives from each of the ten schools were invited to participate in a two-day forum in Phoenix, Arizona, in January 2002, to discuss how the arts can contribute to whole school reform, improving and sustaining a school's overall quality and performance. The forum was one of three that AEP conducts annually to engage researchers and practitioners in addressing critical issues in arts and education. The schools presented and discussed their arts programs in small group sessions with AEP staff and other meeting participants. The forum thus served as an additional means of vetting the potential of the invited schools to function as case studies for the research project. Eight of the ten schools were subsequently included in the project.

In spring 2002, we began site visits to the schools. A small team of researchers with experience in arts education research joined AEP in conducting the field work. Two researchers, myself and another member of the team, visited each of the schools. In the course of these two-day visits, we interviewed teachers, students, artists, administrators, families, and representatives of community arts and education organizations working with the schools. We recorded all interviews for transcription and analysis.

An Added Focus

By summer 2002 we had completed visits to four of the case study schools. Though our findings were tentative at that stage, AEP's director Dick Deasy and I began sharing them with colleagues and discussing

them at conferences and meetings, including a Ford Foundation seminar on its new initiative to support arts education in urban areas. We shared with Ford early indications that the arts were improving the relationships between students, teachers, and other community members at the schools. The arts, it seemed, helped to build understanding among diverse groups of students as well as a sense of school community.

Ford was interested in the question of how the arts could foster a commitment to pluralism and a shared sense of community in schools, a crucial challenge they recognized for the country as a whole. Ford offered support to focus in our project on the community-building potential of the arts. The decision to do so had significant consequences for the entire study and for the findings reported in *Third Space*.

With Ford's support, we convened a small team of researchers to develop an additional set of questions that would allow us to take a closer look at the nature of community in the remaining site visit schools; to see whether the arts were playing a role in shaping that community; and if so, to determine what could be learned from the process that could benefit other schools. The community lens allowed us to look more closely at the relationships in the schools and how these relationships changed in the presence of the arts.

A third researcher joined us on each of the remaining site visits to conduct the necessary additional interviews using this new set of questions. At that time, we added two additional case study schools to the study, responding to the need to include another high school and another middle school. This brought the total to ten. The final six school site visits were completed in fall 2002.

The Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Following each site visit, researchers completed initial reports for the schools that they visited. Combing these reports and our interview transcripts, I produced a first draft of the themes that were emerging from the data, and in March 2003, we convened the majority of the researchers who had participated in the site visits to reflect upon, interrogate, and extend these themes. We continued our analysis with the guidance they provided.

In the fall, we held a similar meeting with representatives from each of the case study schools. As we had with the researchers, we shared the central themes drawn out in our analysis—by then more defined—for their reflection and comment. The schools concurred with our analysis and told us they thought that we had captured well the central tenets of their work. Over a day and a half meeting, we held discussions to refine the emerging framework for reporting the findings of the study.

Two Perspectives Emerge

It became clear in the later stages of our analysis of the data that we had two major stories to tell. One had to do with the processes and procedures through which the schools built and sustained their arts education programming, making it a part of the fabric of the school. Included in this story were factors that the schools saw as important to their success, and practical lessons they had to share with other schools. This was essentially the story that we had set out to tell.

The second story had to do with the nature and effects of the arts programming—the ways in which it seemed to be changing what school was about, and the new opportunities it created for teaching and learning and for building community within and around the schools. The first story was about *how* and the latter about *what* and *why*. We faced an important decision about which of these stories we would tell in this book.

A team of school leaders—two principals, one state education official, and one teacher educator—gave us important guidance. We had asked for their assistance in the early stages of the project because they were representative of the audience we thought the project would have—school leaders. They counseled us then on how to present our findings most usefully to that audience. Together, we had imagined an easy-to-use manual, complete with tabs and tables. When we sought their advice at this later stage of the project, however, they pointed us in a new direction.

They had reviewed a draft of the book and were struck by the discussions of the changes that occurred in the schools for students, teachers, and families. They believed that this set of stories had profound implications for the way we in the United States think about and define the purposes of school. They urged us to make this the focus of the book and to widen our audience to those more generally concerned about public education.

At this meeting we discussed with them the metaphor of *third space* encountered in one of our school visits, a metaphor which we felt could be the framework for the discussion of the changes we saw happening at the schools. Despite the initial ambiguity the term held for them, they recommended that we embrace the metaphor in the title of the book and in the interpretation of our findings. They believed the term could be a signal to readers that new thinking about teaching and learning was essential, and that the arts had an important role to play in changing education. “Tell that story,” the administrators advised. That is what we have tried to do.

The Book

In developing the final text of *Third Space*, Dick Deasy and I shared successive drafts with researchers and with staff at the case study schools. Their thoughtful comments helped us to refine the telling of the schools’ stories.

In Chapter 1, we set the stage for these stories, defining third space and introducing the schools and their arts education programs. We look in Chapter 2 at the importance of third space for students, elaborating upon how the arts help learning to become meaningful and relevant to them, and how the arts help students to develop a strong sense of self. In Chapter 3 we explore the kinds of thinking skills and capacities students develop in the arts. In Chapter 4 we look at the ramifications of arts learning for language and literacy development. In Chapter 5 we discuss the changes in schools from the perspectives of teachers—how the arts increase their satisfaction and efficacy in teaching. Finally, in Chapter 6, we

explore how the arts build a sense of community within and around the schools.

We share the stories of what is occurring in the schools through the voices and artwork of their students, teachers, artists, families, and administrators. We do our best to honor their work and to convey its importance to the national debate about the purpose and design of the public school.

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