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Project 3

The following is an interpretation of research conducted on the subject of an arts school. The goal of the research is to identify design considerations for the classroom spaces of a performing and visual arts high school. Because an arts school is classified as an alternative school, one that is different from the usual or conventional, it is possible that its needs will not be met by the conventional classroom. This is based on the assumption that an arts school is alternative both in its curriculum and its approach to teaching that curriculum. Therefore, the following question is asked to determine which of these will have more impact on design: Is an arts school defined by its curriculum or by its methods?

The first attempt to answer this question comes from research into writings on alternative schools. Alternative schools take many forms, with only some having a themed curriculum like an arts school. However, they all have some commonalities including “small settings, positive climate, choice of participation, a shared vision, focused curriculum, program innovation, and high levels of student engagement, membership, and autonomy” (Barr, 15). Beyond the more general classification of an arts school as alternative, it can be further defined as a magnet school, a continuous progress school, and a multiple intelligences school. All of these school types have demonstrated excellence in student performance regardless of curriculum. It is stated for each of these types that “how instruction is delivered often becomes the deciding factor in a student’s participation in the learning process” (Barr, 43). Based on this information, it can be argued that the definition of an arts school relies more on teaching methods than on the classes being taught.

This argument is further supported by a study of the da Vinci Arts Middle School in Portland. It is a public school and was founded in 1996 by a group of parents. Acceptance to the school is by a lottery system and is not based on merit or skill. Art is a clear focus of this school and is apparent in the facilities they offer, which include studios for ceramics, drawing and textiles, an auditorium, a recording studio, a dance studio, a dark room and a student designed water garden. Arts courses comprise two of seven periods in each school day, and each student is required to complete an Arts Capstone project at the end of their eighth grade year. Although art is a major part of the

curriculum, it is not the defining factor. This is apparent in the published vision statement of the school found on their website:

Students at da Vinci will learn through the arts in a community of students, teachers and parents working together.

Because we believe:

The arts are essential to human development

The arts empower people

The arts enhance learning

Key components of our vision:

A small, mixed-age learning environment

Self-motivated, participating students & Involved families

A collaborative, challenging, and stimulating curriculum

An arts-oriented culture

To accomplish this vision, da Vinci also uses art as a method for teaching: “The arts are often used in the core curriculum classes as a way of engaging students and reinforcing learning.” They approach art as a means of expression, invention, discovery and reflection.

To enhance this study of the school, especially the concept of art as a teaching method, I attempted to interview the principle but was unsuccessful in coordinating an available time. Below are some of the questions that would have been asked:

1. Is the school based on any particular model or precedent of an arts focus school?
2. Which is more important to the vision of the school, what the students are learning or how they are learning?
3. The school’s brochure states that the arts are often used in the core curriculum classes as a way of engaging students and reinforcing learning, what would be an example of this?
4. Because admission is not based on merit or skill, is there any difference in the success of students that demonstrate a natural ability in one of the arts and those that don’t?

Because the interview was unsuccessful, I consulted another source to find information on art as a teaching method. In an article for Education Week, Marcia Daft,

a professional musician and “teaching artist,” describes her experiences with teaching. Beginning fifteen years ago Daft worked as a teaching consultant. At this time, teachers were asking guest artists to not only perform or teach their craft but to “connect their work to the content that students studied in the classroom.” She was trained in the curriculum and traveled to schools to show teachers how to use art as a method for teaching their lessons. She states that art can be an appropriate and helpful tool for teaching science, math, geometry and history. In a geometry class, for example, she taught students to relate line and shape in their lesson to body line and body shape in dance. She states that “students were able to absorb ideas on a deep, conceptual level and with what seemed to be less effort.” From this article it is clear that art can be used as a successful teaching method, and it can help a school like da Vinci to fulfill its vision.

An arts school is an alternative school and requires spaces that can accommodate art classes as well as conventional classes. However, because an arts school is an alternative school, it approaches instruction delivery in an alternative way. Therefore, the conventional classroom must be reconsidered. Even though a classroom in an arts school may only be used to teach geometry, it should provide a space that could also accommodate dance, as was described by Marcia Daft. This would allow the students to “learn through the arts” (da Vinci). In conclusion, an arts school is more clearly defined by its approach to teaching and learning than it is by the classes it offers. Design consideration should be given to these teaching methods and a classroom design should reflect this.

## Works Cited

- Barr, Robert D. and William H. Parrett. How to Create Alternative, Magnet, and Charter Schools That Work. Bloomington, Indiana: National Educational Service, 1997.
- Daft, Marcia. "Artists as Education Consultants." Education Week 11 February 2008. 05 December 2008. <<http://www.edweek.org>>.
- da Vinci Arts Middle School. 05 December 2008. <<http://www.davinci.pps.k12.or.us/>>.