

# What About "Unified Arts" in the Middle School?

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*"Unified arts" in the Madison, Wisconsin, middle schools are learner-oriented. Goals include: exploration geared to interest and ability; proficiency in skills; developing confidence as a consumer; selecting approaches to careers; and deciding about use of leisure time.*

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**F**OR two decades now, articles have been written about the middle school concept. Attention has been focused on rationale for conversion from the traditional junior high school to the middle school. Other aspects of the transition such as organizational structure, instructional programs, teaching methodologies, and in-service programs have been described in varying detail.

Since the instructional program is the feature component of a middle school, the purpose of this article is to focus on that phase through a description of the unified arts program. The term "unified arts" is defined in Madison, Wisconsin, Public Schools as consisting of the disciplines of art, home economics, industrial arts, and in some instances vocal music and physical education.

Students of grades 6, 7, and 8 participate in all aspects of the program at all grade levels. Participation is centered on a scheduled block of instructional time (about 80 minutes two or three times weekly) and a block of open laboratory time (about 80 minutes two or three times weekly). All classes are co-educational and are team taught. The program has been planned as a continuous sequential experience allowing all students to explore the three arts areas in each of three years. As a student begins to integrate the experiences from two or more arts areas, he is encouraged to make individual decisions about the laboratory space most supportive of his immediate needs.

## Planning

Planning for the unified arts program emphasized two separate components: (a) instructional program development, and (b) team organization and coordination. Planning for the instructional program was initiated prior to the transition to the middle

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school organizational structure. Planning for team development was accomplished during an in-service training program before the transition of each junior high school to a middle school. The goals of the unified arts program were developed by a staff-community task force in 1968-69 and to date have continued to set the direction for the program.

These goals are:

*Exploration:* to provide all middle school learners with the opportunity by which they may learn through exploration geared to their own interest and ability

*Skills:* to encourage all middle school learners to achieve a gratifying degree of proficiency as required through self-assessment

*Consumerism:* to assist all middle school learners in gaining confidence in creatively consuming personal, family, and environmental resources for effective living in a changing society

*Careers:* to enable all middle school students to select, through exploratory experiences, future curricula directed toward occupational and career development goals

*Leisure:* to help the early adolescent make decisions about leisure time.

## Program Characteristics

The unified arts program shares the instructional goals of the middle school: it provides for all middle school learners; it utilizes an interdisciplinary approach; and it encourages exploration in the arts areas. Exploration is defined as (a) increased learner exposure to more subject areas and the related experiences, media, and materials therein; and (b) increased learner opportunity to explore his own interests and abilities.

How then does a unified arts program differ from a separate arts program? Unified arts:

1. Claims its general title of unified arts in preference to individualized subject area titles, thus stressing the integration of knowledge

2. Synthesizes the individual art areas into a meaningful whole

3. Integrates knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values between and among the arts as well as between the arts and academics

4. Is not a course but rather a series of instructional relationships depending on both teacher and student behaviors.

## Learner Outcomes

The expected learner outcomes of the unified arts program are expressed here in two forms, behaviorally and as the learner might perceive them himself.

The child will assess his self-potential and purposefully plan for its development. (I am beginning to find out what I can do and how I can improve.)

The child will show sensitivity to the aesthetic components of his environment. (I am happy with my surroundings.)

The child will utilize precaution and employ safe practices in school, home, and community participation. (I will do all my work carefully and safely.)

The child will synthesize the components and interrelationships of the total unified arts structure. (I am beginning to see how things relate to each other as in unified arts.)

The child will capitalize on his unique and useful individual strengths. (I am finding out what I can do best.)

The child will build a balance between his individuality and mass society. (I enjoy working alone as well as with other people.)

The child will use leisure to find meaning, purpose, and self-fulfillment. (I enjoy choosing how I will use my free time.)

The child will employ the skills of consumerism to meet his present needs. (I am learning about making my own selections.)

The child will think through solutions to problems. (I am growing in my ability to make decisions.)

The child will relate core learnings and open-lab and independent study opportunities to personal living. (I am discovering that it is fun to learn through exploration.)

## Implementation

Various strategies are used in the unified arts program. Basically the program:

1. Utilizes a block of time, a unit of students, specialized facilities, and a team of teachers representative of the arts areas
2. Requires individual teacher competencies in human relations and decision making
3. Gives teachers, and ultimately students, decision-making responsibilities as to the relationship of learning objectives to the resources of time, space, materials, and staff
4. Is taught in large, medium, and small groups, as well as providing for individualized instruction and learner self-initiation
5. Allows for a variety of team patterns involving any combination of two or more arts areas and/or arts areas directly linked to (an) academic team(s) and/or middle school goal
6. Occupies varied instructional facilities including accommodative laboratories representative of each of the arts areas, instruction and resource materials centers, large group instructional areas, and community resources
7. Utilizes multiple instructional methodologies and media
8. Promotes flexibility across arts areas so as to give total perspective to a concept.

## Evaluation

Evaluation of the unified arts program is in terms of the learner. It recognizes the value of individualized evaluation in terms of progress toward the behavioral goals established for the unified arts program. It stresses individualized instruction and evaluation in terms of degree of proficiency as required by the learner himself. In addition, it involves the necessity of assessing one's self via communication with parents, peers, and teachers.

## Staffing

Unified arts is taught by a team of teachers representing the arts areas. In a school of 750 students a team of six (two from each

arts area) plus a teacher aide are responsible for curriculum development and implementation congruent with the program goals. A learning coordinator, one of two in the school, assists the unified arts team via weekly team meetings in accomplishing planning and organizational expectations. Staff members must have a positive attitude toward team teaching, sensitivity toward the needs of children, and a commitment to student-centered learning. The ability and desire to participate in interdisciplinary teaching are also necessary prerequisites for a functioning unified arts team.

Other factors such as facilities and scheduling are important considerations for the efficient functioning of a unified arts program; neither, however, should dictate the program. Only two of Madison's 10 unified arts programs operate from newly designed open concept facilities. A block scheduling design is utilized, giving unified arts the equivalent of one-third of the available instructional time. Planning time for teachers is also allocated within the schedule and provides for both total team and individual arts area planning.

Programs have been initiated in 10 schools over a four-year period, with approximately 7,000 students participating each year. The first group of students to have experienced the entire three-year unified arts sequence through grades 6, 7, and 8 are in grade 10 this school year. Experienced high school staff members note definite changes about the unified arts student as compared to the student of the past with a single arts exposure. The unified arts student is described as being more willing and interested in exploratory activity, more self-directed, more sensitive to his own development and needs, and generally more open to considering his or her career development process.

By having arts-related exploratory learning experiences over a three-year development growth period, and by having opportunities to make several individual decisions about these experiences, the transitional age learner should be in an advantageous position to cope with future career, leisure, and continuing education decisions. □

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