

Arts for Academic Achievement

Long-Term Artists' Perspectives

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Introduction

This report summarizes the perspectives of a sample of artists who have been involved in Arts for Academic Achievement for multiple years. In two focus groups the artists discussed:

- how the AAA projects they have been involved with have changed over time,
- what they've learned about collaborating with teachers and integrating the arts,
- the benefits of AAA that they had observed for students and teachers,
- how they've been affected by their involvement in AAA,
- the strengths of AAA, and
- challenges in collaborating with teachers and integrating the arts, or, in other words, areas that could be improved.

AAA staff provided the evaluators with a list of 14 artists for the study. The criteria for inclusion on the list were that the artist had been involved in AAA for several years and had worked in more than one AAA school during that time. In July 2007 CAREI evaluators invited the artists to participate in one of two 90-minute focus groups. Participation in the study was voluntary and artists were offered an incentive of \$75 to participate. A total of 10 artists attended the focus groups. They worked in a range of art forms – dance, music, theater, visual arts – and all had been involved with AAA for at least 5 years. Four had been involved with AAA since the program began.

The evaluators developed the focus group questions in consultation with AAA staff. Each focus group discussion and interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. To encourage frank responses, participants were assured that their comments would remain anonymous. The evaluators analyzed the results by reviewing the focus group transcripts to identify themes in the artists' responses.

Caution is recommended in generalizing the findings in this report beyond the artists who participated in the focus groups. The number of focus group participants was small relative to the large number of artists who have been involved in AAA over the past decade, and the artists who chose to participate in the study may have had experiences that are notably different than those that did not participate. Nevertheless, the information in this report does provide the long-term perspective of artists involved in AAA for many years and this, in itself, has value for understanding the program and its consequences for students and teachers.

Results

The artists' comments about their experiences in AAA were very positive. They valued how AAA supported their close collaboration with teachers, often the same teachers over time, to make arts an integral part of teaching in other curriculum areas. They appreciated not only AAA's financial support for this work, but also the involvement of AAA program staff in coaching and facilitating projects, and AAA's emphasis on the mid-course and final reflection processes. Many described how their work with a teacher, or group of teachers, over a period of several years led to:

- improvements in how the artist and teacher work together;
- deeper connections between arts and academics in arts integrated instruction; and
- growth in teachers' comfort with and ability to provide arts integrated instruction without the artist being present.

The artists also discussed some of the challenges in collaborating with teachers to integrate the arts, especially when teachers feel pressure to prepare students for standardized tests in reading and mathematics. More detail on the findings in each of these areas appears below.

How AAA Projects Change Over Time

AAA encourages teachers and artists to develop long-term relationships so that over time the connections in their AAA projects between the arts and the curriculum deepen and teachers learn how to provide arts integrated instruction even in the artist's absence. It is clear from the artists' focus group comments that there was success in each area, though not necessarily in every project or with every teacher. The artists talked about the changes that occurred in their projects and some of the ingredients that seem to support success.

Working together over time allows artists and teachers to develop successful working relationships and become more familiar with the program.

“The two schools I worked with the past two years I definitely saw improvement. That first year they're starting to get it and the second year they're settling in and got the idea of how things should go.”

“As time has gone on, we've all gotten better at figuring out how to do the residency so that we're really truly working together.”

An artist who has worked with the same teacher in the same school for four years described the progression in their relationship and their roles on the project. The artist's description also illustrates how the project expanded to reach more and more students over time.

“It started out as a residency, although with major planning. . . . The second year was mentorship, perhaps. I can't remember what your second level was [refers to models of implementing AAA]. The next year was co-

teaching. And then the last was peer teaching, and really I was mostly just a coach. . . . I've not only handed over all my lesson plans to her, she has found money from various sources to invest in all the props and the books and the visuals and the costumes to implement this plan. We started implementing in third and fourth grade and then we've added a grade each year. So each year I would introduce the new program, but then I would back off from the one from the year before. So now we've gone through all the programs of all the years [grade levels] she will experience."

The artist noted the exceptional nature of this partnership,

"In however many—20 years, I've done this, I think it was probably the first time that that's ever worked that way. And that's a credit to [teacher], who does have a dance background. It's very comfortable and she's interested in doing more and more of it. So this was really definitely a partnership. And it might be the best art education partnership I've ever been a part of."

Some of the characteristics of this project that likely contributed to its success were as follows: the teacher had a background in the art form and was interested in building teaching skills in the art form, the teacher remained at the school during all four years of the project, and the funding for the project did not decrease over time. This contrasts with the reality in some AAA schools where the intensity of a project decreases over time as a school must divide a fixed pot of funding among more and more teachers who are interested in AAA. Although an experience like this may be rare, it still has value for AAA as an exemplar to which the program can aspire.

In reflecting on how their projects changed over time and what leads to a successful partnership, another artist offered an example in which less time was needed before the teacher was comfortable teaching without the artist. As the artist described it, this project was initiated by a teacher after the teacher and the artist were in a workshop together. The teacher specifically asked the artist to come into her classroom saying, *"This is something I need more expertise on in the classroom."* The artist came into the classroom and coached the teacher as the teacher tried to teach some of the exercises from the workshop. The teacher also asked the artist to meet afterwards and give the teacher feedback. The next year the teacher told the artist, *"Okay. Now we're gonna do a new unit. Let's teach something else. I've got poetry. I'm good. Let's do a novel."* The artist noted that teachers becoming comfortable teaching in the art form can sometimes happen on a shorter timeline than four years and maybe one factor in this case was that the teacher and artist were familiar with the same method from their experience in the workshop together.

Another artist has noticed that *"teachers think they want to do it on their own, but they're just not quite sure how to do it."* To address this, the artist described a process that can help teachers become more comfortable:

"I had one school I'm working with now where it's really the process of coming in, showing, sort of modeling that, sitting side-by-side helping them to prep materials so they can get over that sort of little obstacle. And then being with them when they teach the first time on their own. So it's not an easy process, you know? But

then they just all the sudden have this confidence that, 'Okay, I'm gonna do this on my own now.' And that makes me feel good, you know, if you can sort of bring them to that place."

In contrast, some artists offered examples in which a teacher was not comfortable implementing the project without the artist:

"Because of schedule conflicts this year, we tried letting one of the teachers take over one of the classrooms and I worked primarily with the other classroom and just checked in on her. She really missed me being in the room because there's a certain element that an outside person can bring and knowledge I have. . . . She likes having me in there because it's a school that's typically had troublesome students and so if you're gonna try something that's hands-on, you need two people there to keep track of what's going on. So we're kinda going back on that [the teacher doing the project alone]."

When asked how influential the teachers' comfort in the art form was in their willingness and ability to take over the teaching, the artists concurred that that was one factor but not the only factor. Time also plays a role, as does how the artist and teacher work together.

"I think it's a combination of that [teacher comfort with the art form] because I have some teachers in a school where I keep going back to that have started to continue to do what I do in the classrooms. I want them to learn the songs and dances and I share all the material with them and stuff. Some of them don't do anything with it, and some of them, after now a few years, are feeling like they could do it. They're comfortable with it. But I think not all of them do [it]."

"It can take four years just in itself to get a teacher comfortable who is not used to moving."

Many of the artists mentioned the collaboration between the teacher and the artist as a key to a successful project. When asked what makes an effective collaboration, the artists offered the following comments:

"Collaboration is to understand my program, what I'm trying to do and of course I understand because we've gone through school and everything. But I'm coming with a program. So their collaboration is just to be a student because I'm teaching them, the teacher, how to be me when I leave, taking over the program and working the program to strengthen it for the next time I come in. And be active, be that student, and the program will live in your class. You can take my program and put it with any curriculum. So once they learn the formula and be involved, they're collaborating. And then they can take off and say, 'You know, I tried that. I've tried it with English the other day and it worked and I'm gonna try it with this and —you know? That's what I want to hear and that's what I'm working on. To make them understand."

Another artist talks about collaboration as passing the ball back and forth,

"I want it to be - and I'm getting to where this last year two teachers were definitely in the zone. I want it to be where we're literally co-teaching -- where we know where we're going and we're passing the ball back and forth, where I'll do an activity, I'll pass it back to the teacher, they'll do more but they'll assign a writing thing, they'll give an example. So literally based on the plan that we have for the day we can literally pass it back and forth. And the more you work with the teacher, the more you're able to do that because it grows. . . . And it was fabulous because the kids then got to see me interacting with the science end a little and her interacting with the art stuff and I could see that they would pay attention when we crossed over where we were"

expected to be. At the end she produced sort of a - we ended with a storyboard of an origins story and she produced her own private storyboard that she shared with the kids before they did theirs and they were like, really impressed with what she came up with. Seems like it's that thing of she really was totally on board. But that's, you know, that's six years."

Artists also mentioned the role of the AAA site coordinator in a project's success, especially their importance in communicating with the artists and the teachers.

"Communications. It's a management issue; we know teachers are in classrooms with students. And thank God for email, but it's about having a point person who you can go to and that person serves as a crossroads, the intersection, the traffic cop and says 'Yes, we'll have the meeting on this day' or 'Yes, you can invoice me now. Yes, this is the schedule.' Someone who's plugging you in because the teachers need support. The classroom teacher needs outside support in order to have you in their room to really do the AAA model, which is to really be in-depth and academically serious. . . . Otherwise then you come in, you show up, you unpack your suitcase of tricks and you do your tricks and you pack up and you go. And I think the communication piece is what I find really valuable in good coordinators. . . . Communicating with everyone, including building leadership and security, and helping you get the classroom unlocked."

"I found myself compensating for maybe a coordinator that wasn't communicating or sort of dropped the ball on communications, contacting the teachers myself and wondering 'Should I be doing this or not?'. I knew what had to be done [from previous AAA projects], so after a couple of e-mails [to the coordinator] it's like 'Okay; I'll just go ahead and set up this meeting myself.' I'm not clear sometimes what my responsibility is, especially if I don't have a certain piece of knowledge or if it looks to me like something is kind of going over a cliff."

In addition to the site coordinator roles of communicating and managing projects, the artists also described the importance of having someone in the project team who is able to facilitate the planning process and do the paperwork required for a project.

"One of the things I like so much about AAA is you send out this mediator, or I think there's another term—coach --the in-between person that comes from AAA to help both the teacher and the artist try to speak the same language. And that person, even though they're not the [site] coordinator person, I'm starting to feel it's just essential in these programs to have someone who can do that. Even though I'm trained as an educator, it's really different trying to come in as the artist and try to do both roles. You kinda need someone else there saying, 'Okay. This program needs X, Y, Z, and I'm here to see that it gets it. And we need to talk about this, this, this. And no, you can't go out to lunch before you talk about it.' (Laughter) It's just that life is too crazy, and if you have a third person there saying, 'This is what it's all about and let's make it work for both sides,' it's just like the tension just goes away. Not that there's been tension, but the possibility of tension goes away because of this person. And then if you have a coordinator who is an effective manager, then you've got it all."

The artists were then asked if this is a role a site coordinator can play or if it works best to have AAA staff involved.

"I haven't witnessed a coordinator who was able to have the clout and the knowledge both to do that."

“I have. And I’ve also had coordinators who don’t get the paperwork at all, and I’ve had coaches who do. I mean, I think it’s about the – in the end, it’s about the team, right? As long as someone gets the paperwork – Sometimes it’s your coach. Sometimes it’s your coordinator. I mean, I wouldn’t want a rigid necessarily. As long as I don’t have to – [Laughter]”

“Well, I’ve seen all of those situations. I mean, I have been in a position where the teachers are so strapped and stressed out, they can’t put it together, and I have done it. And I’ve had enough training that I could sorta do it, and I check in with them and they were happy to pay me for those extra hours to do that. So it was flexible. And that was after we lost that main coordinator who could just do it.”

It seems in some cases the coordinator is able and available to do facilitating with individual projects, but in other cases someone from AAA is needed to perform that function on a project. Some coordinators may be in the classroom full-time themselves, or not have the background in AAA forms or be empowered by their principal to guide other teachers in doing what is expected.

Challenges

Although the artists were overwhelming positive in their comments about AAA, they also talked about challenges they’ve experienced in some of their projects. One challenge is making expectations clear up front, not only expectations for who will do what, but the role of the arts in the project.

“I don’t know that everyone’s clear on the expectation going into it as far as what role everyone’s going to play; who’s going to do the coordinating; who’s going to arrange for classroom time or whatever it might be. . . . If I were to say what could we do to improve it, it could be going into that initial meeting with the teachers and the AAA person and saying ‘This is what I’ll be doing as the coordinator. This is what the teacher will be doing.’ I sometimes get the feeling that they don’t necessarily expect me as an artist going in to tie what I’m doing to their curriculum closely. I’ve been invited to meetings after they’ve already met or something like that where I may not have been involved in the initial planning. I think that got better this year.”

The artists expressed concern that some teachers and some schools may be sliding back to an earlier model of the arts as fun and games. In some cases they have found it more difficult to schedule planning time with teachers and when the artist is in the classroom the teacher does not expect to be involved. One artist described the frustration of not having all of the teachers present for a planning meeting.

“I sit down at the table with all of them and I make sure that happens because there were a few times where some of the teachers didn’t come to some of the meetings, and that disturbed me because they’re the ones on the computers and not caring. They’re spending money and not caring.”

The artist went on to relay how in one case he was able to work with the coordinator and principal to get all teachers at the meeting. The artist also sees it as part of his job to motivate an unmotivated teacher, *“So I wound up teaching that person how to motivate themselves and get involved. Which is part of my job, also, you know?”*

In some cases the artists have not been full participants in a project. For example, sometimes they are called after the planning has occurred and this makes it more difficult to integrate the arts rather than having the arts as an add-on. In some cases the artists haven't been included in the loop of communication for AAA in terms of what is expected for a project, including the reflection sessions.

As mentioned earlier, the artists talked about the importance of the site coordinator for a project's success. They also expressed concern about the loss of leadership in some AAA schools and the need for AAA to better fund and develop the site coordinator position.

“What’s happened in three or four of the other schools is that the AAA person that was the driving force behind it has gone away and the program has died. . . . So I think as far as looking down the road with AAA that is a real problem; finding those leaders and making sure they’re compensated for that. Because I think the problem is the school gets the money and they say, ‘Well, we need to use it for the kids.’ But the truth is, some people are motivated and get it, but it is a huge commitment [for the coordinator].”

“I think they need to invest financially and in other ways in the site leadership and they need to build that leadership capability in this programming. . . . You see the different ways in which AAA is managed in different sites. And when you have strong, committed leadership on site, it’s [arts integration] really taught them. And then it’s a little unfocused in some schools because the leadership is—who knows? Sometimes they’re too generous, if I may. They’re just too egalitarian in a certain way that’s not getting the work done. . . . Let’s have everybody do it a millimeter deep instead of a few [going deeper].”

Finally, the artists also talked about problems in getting paid in a reasonable amount of time for their work in AAA. This didn't happen at all schools; artists said it really varies, but it happens often enough that it is a concern for them.

“I’ve been chasing money for the work I’ve done this year like a rabid wombat. I had to go down to 807 and literally walk through where the invoice was supposed to have gone, where it did go, where it didn’t go, who had seen it, what had heard of it, who had heard of somebody who saw it. . . . It’s a maze down there.”

“If we could make up a cleaner, clearer expressway for these to travel; every time it goes from person to person it’s a nightmare.”

Benefits for Teachers and Students

As they work with teachers and students in an AAA project, the artists witness the value of arts-integrated instruction. Many of the artists described experiences in which teachers were able to see a new side of their students as a result of integrating the arts. For example,

“When you have outside people in your classroom you get information about your students that you yourself may not have seen. But that kid that’s pesty and is pushing your teachers’ buttons, and that kid that’s acting out a little and the acting out cracking kids up or acting out in behavior, often they have a great presence on stage. And they’re incredibly quick-witted. Theater and storytelling is – the oral sports, so to speak -- is an area for them to thrive. And so I believe that it provides insights to teachers to see their students in new ways or in different ways beyond just trying to control them in the classroom.”

Frequently in discussing how arts integration affects students, the artists described how the project allowed students who don't usually succeed in school to experience some success. This experience can affect how students view themselves, how the teacher views the students' capabilities, and how peers view the student.

"I also appreciate that I see students able to succeed in one or another of the processes that don't succeed period in the schools. There are some kids that are not served by the academic model for a million reasons. But if they have a mask on and they're moving, suddenly they're the best one in the class and they know it and everybody else knows it and they have that moment of respect where they're it. Nobody can touch them. And the pride they have in that is like 'Yeah.' We saw it with paper mache, too. It's a huge mess and some of the academically gifted kids are left thinking about what to do, but one of the students who had been on the outskirts of everything was a paper mache genius. And she got great satisfaction from helping finish [the masks of] the ones who are at the top of the class because they weren't going right. She just cruised in and finished it up for them and that was a really nice moment for her. So I see ways that we can give moments that are really, really important because of different abilities and intelligences that aren't necessarily served by the dominant thing."

"There was a young man; he came into a classroom late in the year. I was told that he – from the kids – a couple of girls that they were afraid of him and that he was a bully. And you just take it for what it is, but I saw him not wanting to participate in class and being really just physically – the signals of [being] disengaged. By the time we got to the rehearsal for [title of play], this kid was asking the most incredible things about moving things off and on stage. His sense of understanding the mechanics was unbelievable. And then he also, even though he wasn't a lead part, was thinking of all these little facial expressions and what they could do so they weren't just moving on the jail cell but that they'd put it down, fall asleep and wake up. So this whole subtext of contributing was a slow process. So this is an example of a kid finding voice with his face and body. I think that the [other students'] perception of who he was also shifted. I don't think by the end of the year he was still perceived as the bully."

Benefits for Artists

In reflecting on their work with various teachers and schools in AAA, all of the artists expressed enthusiasm and gratitude for how their involvement in AAA has stretched and stimulated them to develop new skills and explore new areas of their art form and how it can be integrated with academics. For many this development has had implications not only for their immediate work in a particular AAA project, but also for their overall work as a teaching artist. As the artists describe their work it is apparent that they are energized by their involvement with students and teachers.

"It has strengthened me . . . I never thought that I would write a play, or even say 'I will write a play.' . . . Their support allowed me to expand and get to where I really should be, you know? . . . Each year they motivate me without motivating me. I can't wait to get to the table to give them more and find more things to do for the children."

"They [teachers] sort of stretch us as to what can be done by what they would like to do and they have more ideas. So I think our integration of curriculum is much stronger than it used to be and in different ways than it used to be. So I think they are really pushing content in the whole spectrum of book arts in a way that I

actually kind of like to think that in a lot of ways the youth program, which is all about teaching kids in schools, is really stretching content in book arts in a way that we're kind of a leader in it." When asked for an example, the artist continued, "If she [teacher] hadn't called it would never have occurred to me. . . . The whole art form of collage is more powerful, I think, than we ever realized because it's so accessible."

"I see many more possibilities than I used to. When I first started working most of my work was either skit-based or script-based in some way because that's how I do work predominately. And now when I go into a first initial meeting I have no idea what form it will take. It might be skits. It might be exercises. It might be role-playing. It might be a game that I make up. It might be a game that the kids make up. I'm defining what I do in a much larger, more open way and that's really good for me and it's really good for my work, too. . . . I get to like sit down with all of the stuff [curriculum and project goals] and go, 'Okay, how can we make this really live? How can we put them in the very center of this experience by a play or a game or a role-playing thing? How do you make it really live?' And I love that because sometimes it's in math and sometimes it's in science and it keeps me connected with the world and it keeps forcing me to redefine what it is that I actually do by extension because it takes me into new areas. I wouldn't be able to get bored if I were able to get really good money for being bored."

What Artists Value in AAA

In addition to their lengthy participation in AAA, all of the artists have had experiences working in schools through other programs and they reflected on how these experiences differ. Most often the artists mentioned the importance of AAA's emphasis on teachers and artists working together to plan an arts integrated project. They also noted the importance of AAA paying for both artists and teachers to do this planning. As one artist said,

"I work for other organizations, which I like fine, but I really like this model." When asked to describe what he/she liked about AAA model, the artist said, "Number one the paid amount of planning time with a teacher. There's no other organization that I know of that allows six hours of planning time paid to the teacher, and that's gold because they have no time. They're under unbelievable pressure and stress. So when you can say, 'Yeah, it's six hours of planning time, but that's a paid thing' that's huge."

"I have to credit this program because we asked for major planning, like an hour of planning for four hours of teaching, roughly, and you guys [AAA] said 'Okay.' . . . Having taught in so many programs, this one is very, very different in just your willingness to fund planning time; [this] is probably the biggest difference that I find from others. Planning time is everything. It's the blood of the whole project." The artists also resonate with AAA's emphasis on connecting the art in an AAA project to an existing learning goal in the curriculum, rather than being asked to come in and do an art activity with students as a treat or a break from the curriculum.

"I think the thing that makes it [AAA] different from a regular residency is often you're brought in in a residency format to be like a special treat. Even if the residency model itself is in-depth or meaningful or connected to some bigger theme, you're really seen as supplementing. 'This is something we don't normally do. This is some discipline we can't normally offer.' What I like about AAA is you're embedded in what they're already doing. It's more integral. . . . I don't feel like, 'Oh, I have to kind of be really entertaining with the kids.' It's more about, 'How are we going to really be serious and approach something academic and weighty through the arts?' as opposed to, 'Let's come and do something that looks nice at the end and all the parents can come and see.'"

Many artists remarked on the uniqueness of AAA in allowing teachers and artists to work on the same project year after year. In contrast to other funders who seek to fund new work, the artists appreciate the opportunity in AAA to learn from their experience and improve a project over time. The artists described how this focus over time is critical to discovering deeper connections between the art and academics and strengthening the power of the project to affect students.

“Planning time is big, and also that you’re willing to keep funding a project and not figure it’s done. And most other programs will tend to want to do something new. We did something new, but, like you said, deepening. So I really credit AAA for that possibility.”

Several artists talked about the contributions of AAA program staff and their role as a facilitator, partner, and mediator in projects.

“In addition to being a funding stream they provided support in conceiving what the residency might look like. . . . They were able to be a liaison and articulate some things and clarify things for the classroom teacher and the arts coordinator so that they knew what we would be asking of them. And then they helped articulate what exactly we would be doing; and helping in that particular case to select a focus. Like any juicy arts program you could tease out multiple things you wanted to focus on. She was very good at listening to what the teachers were saying . . . she worked with the teachers also to think about what they wanted to focus on over the year. . . . All the paperwork and the forms you have to fill out can be sobering. It’s great to have, instead of just getting a stack of papers, to have a human being there talking you through them and able to listen to the teacher and artist and know their paperwork. And say ‘Great. Here’s what I’m hearing you say that would go right here.’”

“The first few years I would run the children through and the teachers would be over correcting papers or on the computers. . . . We had meetings with the AAA people and it got better and better and this year it was really good.”

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

The tone of the discussion was very positive in the focus groups among a sample of artists who have been involved in AAA for a minimum of five years. The artists clearly value the relationships they have developed with teachers and AAA program staff and they relish the continual challenge of discovering new ways that their art form can enhance student learning. In their comments the artists underscored the value of AAA's emphasis on teachers and artists planning and reflecting together and making art an integral part of instruction, rather than a treat or drop-in activity. Their experiences in AAA also indicate that when artists and teachers work together over time to integrate the arts, in many cases the following changes occur:

- Improvements in how the artist and teacher work together
- Deeper connections between arts and academics in arts integrated instruction
- Growth in teachers' comfort with and ability to provide arts integrated instruction without the artist being present

Collaboration between artists and teachers, like any collaborative work, is likely to involve challenges and the artists articulated these in their discussion as well. Overall, however, the artists' comments reflect their strong belief in the value of AAA for making instruction, and the arts, more accessible to more students.