Stop calling it "PREP"!

Implementing the new arts curriculum

By Terry Sefton, Ph.D. & Jonathan Bayley, Ph.D.

A NEW CURRICULUM

The new arts curriculum for grades 1-8 arrived in schools this past fall. Several years in development, the document sets out fundamental concepts and expectations for each of the four art strands – Dance, Drama, Music and Visual Art. It also provides a thorough discussion of the importance of the arts in the curriculum; of roles and responsibilities of students, parents, teachers and principals; as well as ideas for program planning and assessment. While it may be too early to assess how well the new curriculum is being implemented, it is a timely moment to take a snapshot of practices and attitudes of a few of the key players – principals and teacher educators. Changes to curriculum need a lot of support to make their way into the daily teaching practices of classroom teachers and the learning experience of students. Experienced staff need time to address new expectations and adapt their classroom planning and teaching strategies. Principals have a vital role to play in offering leadership and support for their staff. Faculties of education also have a role to play in preparing teacher candidates to teach all subjects and to be prepared for a career of ongoing professional development.

As professors in a faculty of education, teaching music to both specialists (I/S and J/I) and generalists (P/J), we were interested in pursuing two questions, one directed at principals and the other directed at ourselves:

What are principals doing to support the arts in their schools and to support the implementation of the new arts curriculum in particular?

What are faculties of education doing to help teacher candidates develop the attitudes, knowledge and strategies they will need in the arts classroom?

For the initial phase of this research study, we approached the principals. Using a semi-structured question guide, we conducted short telephone interviews, allowing for digressions and good old-fashioned conversation. Since both of us had taught in public schools before teaching at a university, we found a lot of common ground with the research participants.

As faculty advisors to our teacher candidates, we visit many schools in both the public and Catholic boards. One of the things we have noticed is that a number of schools schedule arts instructional time as "prep" for classroom teachers. We were concerned that this sends a mixed message, giving the perception that arts are at the margins of the central mission within the school. It appeared to us that Music was often an accidental beneficiary around the need to schedule mandated prep time for the classroom teacher. But as is so often the case, it is much more complex than that, and as we talked to principals it became clear that there are differences from school to school, principal to principal and teacher to teacher.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1993, Michael Fullan wrote that the "moral purpose" of education is to make a positive difference in the lives of their students and also to society as a whole. Fifteen years later, Fullan recalled that between 1995 and 2003, the Ontario Conservative government of Mike Harris substantially reduced the public education budget, and "engaged in a running battle with the teachers in the province. The result was bitter conflict, low morale and a flat-lined performance in literacy and numeracy in 1998–2002." One result of the reduction of the public education budget was a trimming back of specialist arts teachers. By 2005, the Coalition for Music Education in Canada reported that Ontario had the lowest percentage of music specialists teaching music in their schools – the worst rate in Canada. And this drop in funding hit schools unevenly. According to the Ontario Music Educators' Association, only 25 per cent of smaller schools have music teachers, and most of them are part-time.

As a result, the new arts curriculum will be taught by arts specialists in some schools, in some classrooms. However, in many other cases, the classroom teacher, with little or no background in the arts, will be expected to deliver the new curriculum.

Principals must provide teachers with every minute of prep; there is no such time guarantee for the arts.

WHAT PRINCIPALS HAVE TO SAY

Most principals admitted they had not yet looked at the new arts document, or had "just scanned it." We asked each principal whether they had 'arts specialists' in their school. We found that the term 'arts specialist' doesn't communicate clearly – one principal thought it only referred to Visual Art. Even the word 'specialist' seemed to be confusing – the word elicited responses about teachers who had taken Additional Qualifications. Some principals identify certain teachers as the music or art teacher if they have more background and a stronger interest in teaching those subjects. Often teachers "pool their expertise," meaning: teacher A prefers to teach Music rather than Physical Education (P.E.), so teacher B will teach P.E. for both classes and teacher A will cover Music.

In some schools, where there is a music teacher with specialist training, the intermediate grades (7-8) get first call; then junior; then primary. How far that stretches depends on whether the music teacher is half-time or full-time, and the population of the school. No schools in our study had a drama or dance specialist, and Visual Art was generally the responsibility of the classroom teacher. All participating principals stated that they offered all of the arts strands at their school. Drama and Dance, however, are often treated as subsets of other subject areas: Dance-Drama, or Art-Drama-Dance or Drama-Language Arts, or Dance-P.E. The operational definition of specialized may speak to interest as much as to knowledge of a particular subject area and pedagogy. One school leader recognized that this wasn't ideal. "In order to provide a really good program – an art program, not just a craft program – teachers must have specialized training." Participants spoke of the comfort level of teachers when teaching specific subject areas, suggesting that many teachers avoid teaching the arts because they are "intimidated" or "uncomfortable."

When asked if administrators provided professional development (PD) to staff to assist in implementing the new arts curriculum, the majority stated that PD opportunities were available, either on-site or off, but that the Ministry push for literacy (and to a lesser degree numeracy) dominates workshop offerings. One principal left it up to teachers to make their own arrangements if they wanted to attend board workshops. More typically, principals encourage teachers to attend workshops relating to new curriculum, with the expectation that those teachers will then come back and share what they learned. Every principal also referred to PLC (Professional Learning Communities), indicating that principals receive training and then share information, skills and ideas with their teachers.

Scheduling proved to be an important measure as it provided insight into the values and priorities within the school week; so we asked principals how they approached this important task. Especially in the primary grades, there seems to be considerable flexibility. Music has the most established time frame due to the fact that it is often attached to prep time. Other areas controlled by the homeroom teachers – for example Visual Art – may not be as structured. Principals set the teaching schedule, at least a few essential blocks of it, and often did so with the help of a vice-principal or another teacher. Some principals are much more hands-on; others leave most of the scheduling up to individual teachers. One principal described scheduling for the intermediate classes this way: "I allot the preps and the rotary [Music and Art] and then give the schedule to the teacher to fill in the blanks." Even the length of periods is not standard. One principal had done away with all bells except for the recess bell. He did not want to interrupt classes or make teachers feel that they had to change gears at a certain time.

The first priority that every principal named is the Ministry-mandated 100 minutes a day of uninterrupted literacy, which is usually followed in priority by the 50 minutes a day block for numeracy. French is also a priority, especially where there is a specialist or if French is taught "on rotary."

During our study, participating principals talked a lot about "prep" – usually the second or third in line of priority for scheduling, after literacy. Prep time is a contractual obligation and it increased with the last contract to 210 minutes every five days. One principal called Music a "prep provider." This brought up an interesting alternative to our assumption that having Music or Art identified with "prep" was a bad thing. In an ironic twist, it actually protects the subject that it is linked to – principals must provide teachers with every minute of prep; there is no such time guarantee for any of the arts.

Principals indicated that they monitor whether the curriculum is being taught in a number of ways. In the fall, they check teachers' yearly plans to verify that all curricula will be covered. Many principals engage in what one principal called a "philosophy of management by walking around the school." They are not, however, counting minutes. "As a classroom teacher, you borrow time from one subject – teachers prioritize what they think is important." Several principals discussed the value of integrating subjects and encouraged teachers to make cross-curricular connections, rather than teach a single subject in a set period of time. Art work displays on bulletin boards or in hallways provide visual markers of curriculum delivery, as do student performances at school assemblies. Reporting time provides another measure of teaching activity, "it's very evident when you read report cards if they spent a lot of time working they will have something to comment upon. If every comment is the same for 30 students it sends a signal to me that this is not a priority in the classroom." One principal admitted, "I just know that, come report card time, teachers are sometimes scrambling to come up with a mark for Drama and Dance."

We asked whether teachers cut back on the arts in advance of EQAO testing. The majority of principals stated they would not countenance cutting back on the arts, although one principal indicated that taking time from the arts would be acceptable to prepare for EQAO tests. Another admitted, "Sometimes it's inevitable." Others pointed out that preparing for EQAO was a full year task and that there is "no excuse" for teachers taking away time from other subject areas to prepare. As one principal put it, "I have teachers who know that if they completely wipe that kind of stuff out or reduce it significantly, it's going to have an effect on the morale of the kids."

Finally, we asked how school leaders rate the importance of the arts to other subject areas, what they thought the role of the principal was in supporting the arts, and whether they personally had any background in the arts. Every participant expressed that he/she valued the arts, but there seemed to be an undercurrent just below the surface. All principals feel they have a role to play in supporting the arts, but they defined that role according to priorities set out in guidelines from the Ministry. Although they refer to themselves as "curriculum leaders," few principals feel that they have sufficient background in the arts to offer guidance to their teachers. As a result, administrators often support the arts by encouraging staff to attend workshops or by using school funds to bring in artists from LTTA (Learning Through The Arts). "[Teachers] aren't afraid to come to me and ask for funds, whether it's to take the students to the symphony or to bring in people with different skills for special projects – within reason of course!"

Teachers know that if they completely wipe that stuff out, it's going to have an effect on the morale of the kids.

CONCLUSION

Although we are still in the preliminary stages of an ongoing research project, we found a substantial overlap in principals' responses as well as interesting differences. Principals expressed confidence that all strands of arts are being taught, but after further discussion it emerged that there is a hierarchy within the strands. Generally, Music appears to be the best placed while Visual Art is at the mercy of the homeroom teacher and Dance and Drama are folded into other subjects or not taught at all. Principals did not express concern about teachers' prerequisite knowledge or training, but did acknowledge that the level of expertise varies and that much depends on a teachers' individual comfort level. Additionally, although every principal provides or encourages teachers to seek out PD, there appears to be only minimal PD offered for the new arts curriculum. Music also appears to be the most formally embedded art in the school schedule due to the fact that it is often attached to prep time for the classroom teacher. The daily blocks of 100 minutes for literacy and 50 minutes for math remain the scheduling priority, along with providing prep time. Teachers often have considerable flexibility regarding when and how long to deliver subject area instruction, and

Permission to reprint this article was received by the Ontario Principals' Council.
The original article appeared in The OPC Register, Vol. 12 No. 1.

are encouraged to integrate and teach across the curriculum. While all participants expressed that the arts are important, support is limited to working within Ministry guidelines, fitting it in the schedule and hiring for different "needs."

In addition to the work done to date, we plan to develop a survey based on these initial findings and extend the research to a much larger pool of principals. Turning our lens to practices within education faculties, we will also be conducting interviews with teacher educators in the arts. Our hope is that it will benefit both arts education faculty and school administrators to map current practices, gaps and strategies for implementing the new arts curriculum. As one principal observed, "I do find the arts are neglected in schools. If this research demonstrates that it's not being done or is not consistent, that's great, because it gives us something to reflect on as a board."

REFERENCES

Coalition for Music Education in Canada (2005). Music education "State of the Nation" benchmark study. Accessed January 27, 2010: www.coalitionformusiced.ca/pdf/EnglishMusicReport.pdf.

Fullan, M. (2009). Large-scale reform comes of age. *Journal of Educational Change 10* (2-3), p. 101–113.

Fullan, M. (1993). Why teachers must become change agents. *Educational Leadership 50(6)*, p.12–17.

Ministry of Education (2009). *The Ontario curriculum grades 1-8: The arts.* Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario.

Ontario Music Educators' Association (2007). Submission to the Ontario Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs. Accessed January 27, 2010: www.omea.on.ca/.../Alliance_Brief_MFO_Pre_Budget_Committee_Jan_31_2007_revised.doc

Ontario Principals' Council (2009). *The principal as professional learning community leader.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Terry Sefton, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Windsor. Terry teaches music education and performs often as a professional cellist.

Jonathan Bayley, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Windsor. Jonathan teaches music education and performs often as a professional flutist and conductor.

Email: tsefton@uwindsor.ca or jbayley@uwindsor.ca