

# Integrated Arts Curriculum for Japanese Students and Plans for Future Models: Cultivating Communication Skills

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## ABSTRACT

To meet the increasing demands of the twenty-first century, Japanese students must acquire a variety of talents. However, the first priority at Japanese schools is to increase children's communicative abilities.

In order to help solve this problem, Japan's current curriculum requires music and other arts to be integrated with other subjects at various elementary and junior high schools. The author is going to report on one such program at a junior high school attached to Joetsu University in Niigata Prefecture where students perform in musical productions. The author, who has participated in the program from its inception and throughout its ten-year history, will use the results of student questionnaires to help evaluate its effectiveness.

Furthermore, dance and drama are currently compulsory subjects in many developed countries. One such program in the United States of America is the "Blueprint for Teaching and Learning the Arts, Grades K-12" published by New York City Department of Education (2004) which the author thinks should serve as a model for Japanese schools. The author further proposes new criteria and evaluation methods to expand this approach throughout Japan.

## KEY WORDS

Communication skills      Curriculum Models      Expression and Creation  
Integrated arts      Integrated Study

## 1. Introduction

The future goal of this study is to develop a model curriculum of integrated studies in classrooms through involvement with music, other arts, existing subjects and related themes to cultivate and expand Japanese children's communication skills. As mentioned before, dance and drama are compulsory subjects in many developed countries, and programs in the USA are rich in both quality and quantity. These programs include, not only music and visual arts, but also dance and drama. While these courses of training are often neglected in Japan, especially dance and drama, they enrich and enhance the environments of these other countries.

## 2. Effectiveness of Integrated Arts Curriculum for Japanese Students

Starting in 1996, the junior high school attached to Joetsu University of Education implemented an integrated arts model, successfully combining music, visual arts and dance with drama. This junior high school established a new subject named "The Course of Expression and Creation." It is a combined subject of traditional music and visual arts that aims "to cultivate wide ranges of both creative and sensory activities to enrich the inner world of its students and to help them develop a love of art and artistic expression through dynamic activities and exposure to different art forms." (Joetsu University of Education Fuzoku junior high school, 2004)

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The Chain of the Theme dealing with Expressive Activities concerning Integrated Study		
the seventh grade	“Making Sounds”	Practice 1
the seventh grade	“Video Works”	Practice 2
the eighth grade	“Let’s Express Yourself with Your Body”	Practice 3
the eighth grade	“Handmade Showtime”	Practice 4
the ninth grade	“Chorus and Dance — Harmony with Voice and Body”	Practice 5
the ninth grade	“Musical Guidance and Class Conference”	
the ninth grade	“Stage Expression — Performance School”	
Musicals as Stage Presentation — Compilation of the researches		

Figure 1.

According to a survey taken by 112 students at the school who participated in the course over a three-year period, more than 90 percent of students answered positively to all questions regarding the program. From these results, the effectiveness of this new integrated subject can clearly be judged. (JUEF junior high school, 2006)

Kiyoshi Komachiya, an elementary school teacher and a master’s student at Joestu University of Education, has been observing classes at JUEF Junior High School through the academic years of 2005 and 2006 and wrote about the effectiveness of student musical performances in his master’s thesis, (Komachiya, 2006) under the advise of the author. Both he and the author presented the findings at the annual Japan Music Education Conference (Nihon Ongaku Kyoiku Jissen Gakkai) in 2006. (Questions 1,2,3 and 4 and Figures 1,2,3 and 4 were first presented at this conference.)

**Q1. What did you think was of most valuable during the class musicals?**

1. Working together with classmates to prepare for “stage performance.” (86 of 112 students)
2. Working together with classmates to prepare for “part practices.” (80)
3. Fulfilling the duty of a stagehand. (68)
4. Fulfilling the duty of a performer. (68)
5. Feeling a sense of fellowship during the class musicals. (67)
6. Getting some degree of specialization. (52)
7. Writing a scenario for musicals through student meetings. (36)
8. Giving opinions and supporting classmates during the class musicals. (33)
9. Reflecting on and finding out new aspects of oneself during the class musicals. (32)
10. Other. (2)

**Q2. What did the students learn or find from “Performance School?”**

1. They learned a lot from “Attractive Expression,” or using one’s body to express feelings, and from “Verbal Expression”. (73 students agreed with this statement.)
2. They learned a lot about how to act. (72)
3. They found something about the ability to express oneself. (50)

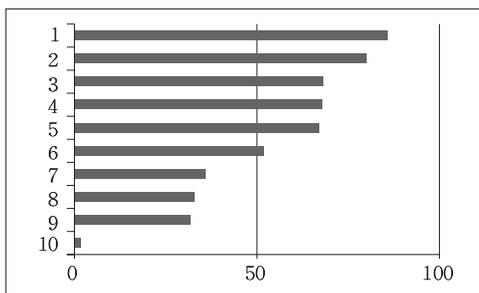


Figure 2. (Q1)

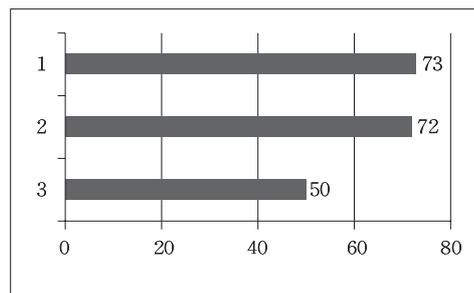


Figure 3. (Q2)

**Q3. How will you make the most of the things that you learned in this class:**

1. By continuing to have a good relationship with classmates. (64 students agreed.)
2. By continuing to cherish comprehensive arts. (54)
3. By continuing to be involved in new environments that actively use expressive ability that was gained through comprehensive arts. (40)
4. By continuing to make the most of the things that were gained through the creation of musicals. (48)
5. Other. (3)

**Q4. If a new subject, such as “Expression and Connection,” which gives students an opportunity to publish musicals or give performances, becomes a part of the curriculum in Japanese education, do you think that it would have merit?**

-Yes 79%    -Neutral 18%    - No 3%

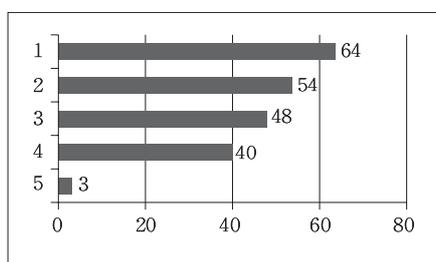


Figure 4. (Q3)

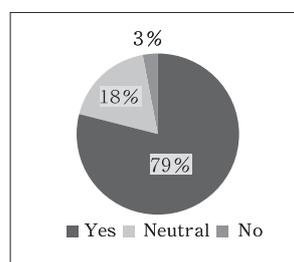


Figure 5. (Q4)

**3. Plans for the Future Model**

However, even this successful example may have difficult problems to solve. Two such problems are the criteria that should be included in order to judge student achievement and how to define the evaluation points which elevate the quality of the activities. In this paper, the author proposes new criteria and evaluation methods in order to expand this approach throughout Japan.

In order to provide children with chances to study through practical experiences, the author proposes the cultivation of communication abilities through various activities. Also, she proposes that the main goal should be to develop and evaluate a model curriculum of integrated studies in classrooms through the involvement and use of existing subjects and related themes.

The following are ten evaluation points about total expression activities by Muto and Tokie. (2006)

- 1) Children’s participation
- 2) Children’s physical expression
- 3) Children’s skill
- 4) Degree of perfection (in the short term)
- 5) “Anchor” experience

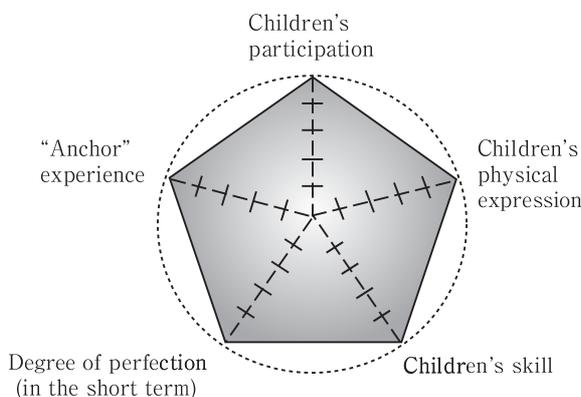
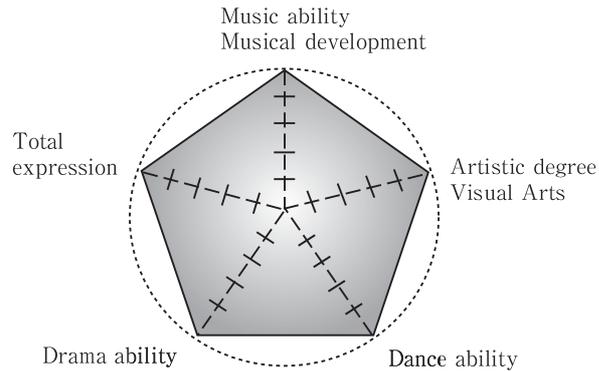


Figure 7.

- 1) Music ability Musical development
- 2) Artistic degree Visual Arts
- 3) Dance ability
- 4) Drama ability
- 5) Total expression



**Figure 8.**

One of the author's goals is to clarify the evaluation points for artistic skills in expression activities. In other words, she wants to systematically clarify which skills children will need and how to evaluate these skills in order for the curriculum to have consistencies. Also, the author wishes to develop and evaluate class models in Japan to methodically cultivate the talents and possibilities of children in the arts and to create educational "anchor experiences."

According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, an anchor is a heavy metal object that is attached to a rope or chain and dropped over the side of a ship or boat to keep it in one place. An "anchor experience," therefore, means an unforgettable experience which remains in one's long-term memory.

Children repeat "anchor experiences," for example, researching activities to express conventional or current issues on the stage in musicals. In the process of these experiences, the educators can evaluate whether young students acquire the ability to solve the problems they face and if they are able to communicate with others.

### **Theory and Future Schedule of Japanese Integrated Arts Curriculum**

- Decide the fields that children should master.
- Systematize the evaluation for how much the children have mastered in each field.
- Build a consistency and balance between music, visual arts, dance and drama.
- Develop and evaluate a model curriculum to systematically educate children's competency and potentiality.

### **Future Japanese Evaluation Models Based on Class Observations in the U.S.A.**

- Determine the evaluation points for total-expression activities containing music, visual arts, dance and drama with the view of keeping them in balance.
- Analyze the four fields of music, visual arts, dance and drama, keeping in mind a certain level of completion and accuracy.
- Provide a better environment and better chances for Japanese children who want to learn arts, for example.
- Create a new curriculum of dance and drama at school.
- Evaluate student achievement using the national standard in the USA as a guideline.
- Define the evaluation standard and make class manuals comparing the current situation in Japan with that in the USA.

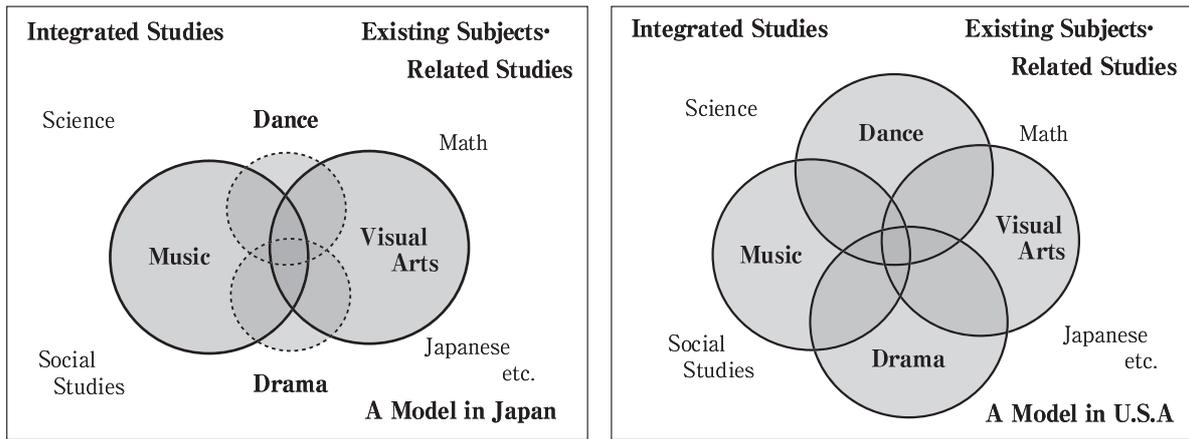


Figure 9. Tokie (2006)

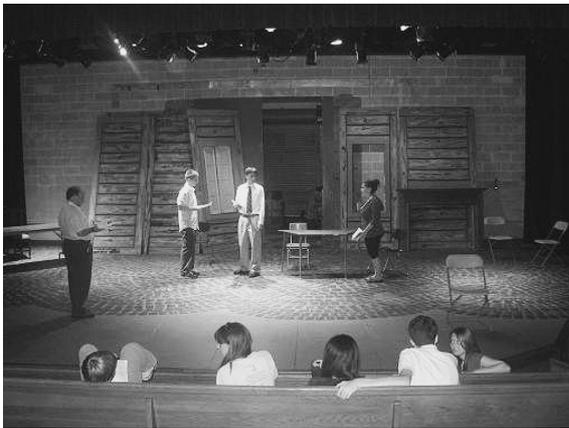


Figure 10. A scene from a drama class at a private high school in Massachusetts



Figure 11. An improvisation activity during a music class at a public elementary school in Iowa



Figure 12. A Scene from the JUEF Junior High School musical (2006)



Figure 13. A dance class with students from the New York University Department of Education (2007)

#### 4. Adapting U.S. Models in Japan

The Japanese educational system in the past obtained excellent results when it was geared toward accepting new knowledge and gaining better skills to create products. However, it did not concentrate on the education of self-assertion and self-realization, or on communication abilities. In this age of globalization, however, it is very important to have better communication skills as well as the ability to clarify one's own ideas. It is also imperative that Japanese citizens be able to understand other cultures and to feel empathy with others.

Educational Departments in New York, Connecticut and Massachusetts have a new teaching approach for children and the arts. While centering on music, the other arts subjects – drama, visual arts, and dance – are integrated into the curriculum to give children many chances to widen their expression activities. If a similar course of study is implemented throughout the Japanese school system, teaching methods such as those in the “Blueprint for Teaching and Learning the Arts for Grades K-12” (2004) must be introduced.

The Blueprint for Teaching and Learning is just what it says—a blueprint or a set of plans. It provides benchmarks that students should be able to reach at the end of certain levels. It discusses what should be taught, but unlike a curriculum, it does not prescribe how to teach it. (Shankman, 2004) Of special importance are the “Community Cultural Resources” and “Careers and Life-long Learning” aspects because they can provide stimulation for independent student-motivated learning.

These connections with other fields can open a channel toward a heightened sensitivity to music, and can deepen life's daily rituals. The activities involved can also help students become more sociable. With this in mind, the models of the U.S. curriculum suggest clues to solve many of the latest problems at Japanese schools.

Also, while the Japanese educational system is largely centralized and controlled by the Japanese government, local governments control education in the USA. This allows members of each community to have an input in their children's education and allows teachers to show their originality in classroom situations. Educators in the U.S. are also able to accept various useful educational methods when teaching music, such as those taught by Orff, Kodaly, Dalcroze and Suzuki, unlike Japan where none of these methods have yet to appear. The author believes that the flexibility of the U.S. school system has been able to enhance American children's creative improvisational abilities much more so than the methods employed in Japan.

#### 5. The Benefits of Exchanging Teaching Methods

While each country has a different teaching system, in this global age, educators should be willing to cross borders and learn other teaching methods, and to use them as needed. As noted in this paper, a new educational model has been introduced in Japan and it has provided many measurable benefits to its students. In the near future, some other models, perhaps those from Asia, the Middle East or Africa, might be introduced while Japanese methods may be exported to other countries.

In fact, recently, the author has talked with university students from Korea and China. Through those encounters, she realized the importance of exchanging opinions about current issues and educational methods. Hence, she believes that exchanging ideas with teachers from other countries about music-teaching methods is a high priority.

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As mentioned before, the author had an opportunity to observe schools on the east coast of the USA. During the visits, Doctor Deborah Damast, the creator of movement classes, Doctor John Gilbert of New York University, and Professor Nancy Shankman, one of the authors of the New York City Department of Education's teaching and learning arts curriculum and a professor at NYU, arranged visits to schools that have advanced curriculums combining various arts fields. She also stressed the importance of sequential education, from elementary through high school, and of intermediating between the educational world and organizations such as the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

(Shankman, Correspondence with author, 2007)

The author was also able to attend lectures by professors at Columbia University. Through these lectures, she learned the importance of practice in children's formative years.

In addition, for all their help, gratitude goes out to teachers at Ohtemachi Elementary School in Joetsu, Niigata, which practices graduation dramas. These are staged reenactments of students' school life performed on graduation day. Furthermore, thanks are expressed to all the teachers whose work has informed this paper. Finally, to all those visiting scholars and students from Asian countries whom the author met during her stay in the U.S. in the fall of 2007, she wishes to express great appreciation for helping to motivate her to write this paper in English, which is Asia's "common" language.

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