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Arts Instruction of Public School Students in the First and Third Grades

Few national studies have been conducted on students' receipt of arts instruction, particularly in the early grades.¹ To address this gap in the literature, this Issue Brief provides a descriptive look at the prevalence of arts instruction received by first and third grade public school students in their schools. Using spring 2000 and spring 2002 data from the School Administrator and Teacher Questionnaires² of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS-K), this analysis examines public school students' receipt of arts instruction in first and third grade and the changes in weekly arts instruction between these grades.^{3,4}

Four areas of the arts are considered in this Issue Brief: music; art; dance or creative movement (hereafter referred to as dance); and theater or creative dramatics (hereafter referred to as theater). For each area of the arts, the prevalence of instruction is measured by whether students worked on lessons or projects in that topic area at least once per week.⁵ Measures were also created to examine changes between grades for students who had arts instruction in at least one grade.⁶

Schools may differ with respect to their capacity to provide instruction in the arts. Therefore, differences by selected school characteristics, namely, community type⁷ and percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch,⁸ are also examined in each arts area. The former measure is used as a proxy for the potential availability of instructors, while the latter tests whether schools with more scarce resources are able to offer the same breadth of instruction as those with greater resources available to them.

Weekly Prevalence of Arts Instruction for First and Third Grade Public School Students

In both first and third grade, greater percentages of students received at least weekly instruction in music and art than in dance and theater, but weekly dance instruction was more prevalent among students than weekly theater instruction (table 1). However, compared to when they were in first grade, third grade students were less likely to receive at least weekly instruction in each of the four areas of the arts. For example, 79 percent of third-graders were taught music at least weekly compared with 86 percent of first-graders, and 73 percent of third-graders were taught art compared with 87 percent of first-graders. Among third-graders, 11 and 4 percent, respectively, were taught dance and theater at least

weekly, compared with 23 and 11 percent of first-graders.

The analysis also reveals differences by community type and by school poverty status. Among third-graders, a greater percentage of students in suburban public schools received at least weekly music and art instruction compared with their counterparts in urban public schools. The percentages of suburban versus urban students who received weekly instruction in art were 77 percent and 69 percent, respectively. Compared with students in high poverty schools in both grades, students in low poverty schools were more likely to receive weekly instruction in music and art. In contrast, no measurable differences were found in either grade between students in high and low poverty schools in weekly instruction of dance or theater.

Comparisons of Arts Instruction Receipt of Public School Students between First and Third Grade

The longitudinal nature of the ECLS-K data allows for an investigation of students' receipt of arts instruction over time. In addition to changes in weekly arts instruction that public school students received between first and third grade, the ensuing analysis considers the percentage of students who received instruction in the arts in at least one grade as well as those who did not receive arts instruction in either grade.

Nearly all public school students received instruction in music (99 percent) and art (about 100 percent) at least weekly in first or third grade. In contrast, 73 percent of public school students received weekly instruction in dance, theater, or both in first or third grade. These findings highlight a consistent pattern in arts instruction in the early grades: similarities existed between the incidences of weekly music and art instruction and between the incidences of weekly dance and theater instruction.

As noted above, public school students in the early grades were more likely to receive weekly instruction in music or art than in dance or theater. Further, the nature of the change over time in the incidence of weekly arts instruction differed by arts area. For instance, 61 and 67 percent of public school students who received weekly instruction in music or art, respectively, in either grade received instruction as often in third grade as in first; in contrast, only 23 and 31 percent of students experienced no change in dance or theater instruction, respectively, over the same period. On the other hand, of public school students who received arts instruction

Table 1. Percent of first and third grade students receiving arts instruction at least weekly and changes in instruction from first to third grade, by selected characteristics: 1999-2000 and 2001-02

Arts instruction by selected school characteristics	Received at least weekly arts instruction		Received arts instruction in first or third grade	Change from first to third grade among those who received arts instruction in either grade		
	First grade, 1999-2000	Third grade, 2001-02		Received less often	Received as often	Received more often
Total						
Music	86.0	78.8	99.3	23.3	66.5	10.2
Art	87.1	73.1	99.9	30.0	61.2	8.8
Dance and creative movement	22.6	10.7	73.5	54.4	23.0	22.6
Theater and creative dramatics	11.4	3.7	72.6	49.0	30.7	20.3
Community type						
Urban						
Music	84.7	74.2	99.0	29.1	58.6	12.3
Art	85.3	69.2	100.0	32.5	56.0	11.5
Dance and creative movement	22.6	9.8	74.9	53.0	23.4	23.6
Theater and creative dramatics	11.3	4.7	72.9	48.3	28.8	22.9
Suburban						
Music	87.1	81.6	99.7	20.2	69.7	10.2
Art	88.9	76.8	100.0	27.8	62.8	9.5
Dance and creative movement	24.7	11.3	73.4	57.5	21.4	21.1
Theater and creative dramatics	12.0	2.4	72.7	52.2	27.9	19.9
Rural						
Music	86.4	80.5	98.8	21.7	69.9	8.4
Art	87.3	73.4	99.6	30.6	64.2	5.2
Dance and creative movement	19.6	10.3	72.3	51.5	24.7	23.7
Theater and creative dramatics	10.0	3.8 ¹	72.2	44.9	37.0	18.1
Percent eligible for free and reduced-price lunch¹						
Low poverty schools						
Music	89.8	83.9	99.8	20.6	69.5	9.9
Art	89.7	77.4	99.9	27.4	64.5	8.1
Dance and creative movement	24.4	10.7	75.4	57.8	22.0	20.2
Theater and creative dramatics	11.4	3.1	76.2	50.5	30.6	18.9
High poverty schools						
Music	81.5	72.7	98.5	26.0	63.1	10.9
Art	83.2	67.5	99.8	33.5	56.5	10.1
Dance and creative movement	20.2	11.2	71.2	48.8	24.1	27.2
Theater and creative dramatics	10.9	4.8	67.6	45.6	31.5	22.9

¹ Interpret data with caution. Standard error is more than one-third as large as the estimate.

¹ Schools where 50 percent or more of the students were eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch are referred to as high poverty schools. The remaining schools are considered low poverty schools.

NOTE: First and third grade estimates were calculated using four categories: Never, Less than 1 time per week, 1-2 times per week, and More than 2 times per week. Less than weekly category (not shown) includes the Never and Less than 1 time per week categories. At least weekly category includes the 1-2 times per week and More than 2 times per week categories. Students were not included in the analysis if they attended a private or public charter school or if they changed schools between first and third grade. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Standard errors are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2005138>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K), School Administrator and Teacher Questionnaires, spring 2000 and spring 2002.

at least weekly, 23 and 30 percent experienced a decrease in music or art instruction, respectively, from first to third grade, whereas between 49 and 55 percent received dance or theater instruction, respectively, less often in third grade than in first.

Whether or not public school students received arts instruction in first or third grade, as well as changes in the receipt of arts instruction between these two grades, were related to school characteristics. Roughly one-third (32 percent) of students in high poverty public schools never received theater instruction in either grade compared with 24 percent of students in low poverty public schools. Furthermore, of the students who received music instruction in either first or third grade, 29 percent of students in urban public schools received weekly music instruction less often in third grade than in first compared with 20 percent of students in suburban public schools and 22 percent in rural public schools.

Conclusion

In both first and third grade, most public school students received weekly instruction in music and art at least weekly, while weekly instruction in dance and theater occurred less often within each year. With regard to changes across grades, a majority of students who received weekly instruction in the arts experienced no change in music and art instruction from first to third grade, whereas roughly half experienced a decrease in dance and theater instruction. In each arts area, the incidence of instruction also varied somewhat by school characteristics. Suburban public school students, for example, received more weekly music and art instruction in the third grade than their urban counterparts.

While this Issue Brief contributes to the body of knowledge on arts instruction, the report does have limitations. For instance, the use of the Less than weekly and At least weekly categories allows for only a limited measure of receipt of arts instruction in the early grades. Also, the analysis does not capture either the quality or the intensity of instruction, in terms of hours spent or number of sessions per day, of students' lessons in the arts.

Endnotes

¹ An exception is *Arts Education in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools*, a school-level study of arts education at both the elementary and secondary levels (Carey et al. 2002).

² Although most items used in this analysis reflect questions posed to teachers, the student is the unit of analysis.

³ Data are representative of the 2 million first-grade students attending a U.S. public school in 1999–2000 who were in the same school in third grade in 2001–02 out of the total estimated population of 3.9 million students. Students were not included in the sample if they attended a private or public charter school, or if they changed schools between first and third grade. With these exclusions, the size of the sample used in the analysis decreased from approximately 9,100 students to 8,296 students. The longitudinal weight, C45CW0, was used for all analyses.

⁴ Data are based solely on teacher reports on work in each of the four arts areas and thus, do not provide a complete description of public school students' experience with the arts in their schools.

⁵ For both the prevalence and change analyses, first and third grade estimates were calculated using four categories of occurrence: Never, Less than 1 time per week, 1-2 times per week, and More than 2 times per week. From these initial categories, two reporting categories were derived: Less than weekly (includes Never and Less than 1 time per week) and At least weekly (includes 1-2 times per week and More than 2 times per week). For the sake of brevity, only the At least weekly category is featured in the adjoining table.

⁶ Discussions of changes in arts instruction are based on the Less than weekly and At least weekly categories. Thus, the analysis does not capture all changes that occurred between grades. For example, if a student had art instruction four times per week in first grade but only three times per week in third grade, no change is reported.

⁷ The term "community type" describes three categories that are defined in the ECLS-K: urban, suburban, and rural.

⁸ To determine the percentage of students receiving free or reduced-priced lunch in a school, the number of students eligible for free and reduced-priced lunch was divided by school enrollment. For schools with missing data for either of these variables, participation in a "school-wide" Title I program was used as a proxy for whether or not free or reduced-priced lunch eligibility was at or above 50 percent. In 1999–2000, schools qualified for school-wide Title I funding when at least 50 percent of students were eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch. Schools where 50 percent or more of the students were eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch are referred to as high poverty schools. The remaining schools are considered low poverty schools.

References

Carey, N., Kleiner, B., Porch, R., and Farris, E. (2002). *Arts Education in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools: 1999–2000* (NCES 2002-131). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

The Issue Brief series presents information on education topics of current interest. All estimates shown are based on samples and are subject to sampling variability. All differences discussed are statistically significant at the .05 level as measured by two-tailed Student's *t* tests (independent *t* tests for cross-sectional analyses and dependent *t* tests for longitudinal analyses); this means a difference is discussed only if the probability that it is due to chance (i.e., sampling variability) is less than 1 in 20. In the design, conduct, and data processing of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) surveys, efforts are made to minimize the effects of nonsampling error, such as item nonresponse, measurement error, data processing error, or other systematic error. For more information on the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS-K), visit <http://nces.ed.gov/ecls>.

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