

Arts in Mind

A series from Kiddo that explores arts and arts education

Finding Meaning in the Third Grade Play

By Adam Saville

Casting a third grade production of "Oliver" isn't easy, and it's almost certainly surprising. Before we cast the play, we knew our students as writers, as readers, and as young mathematicians. We didn't know them as artists, and certainly not as performers. This was something new.

To begin the process of casting roles, we had all of the third graders stand together in a classroom to sing a song from "Oliver". The other third grade teacher and I listened to get a sense of our students' musical talent. We were struck by one girl's talent in particular. Marissa had been new to our school last year. She was small for her age, and was working hard to make up academic ground she had lost the year before, when a serious illness forced her to miss a lot of school. When Marissa sang, our mouths dropped. Her voice was beautifully powerful and sang of a confidence we had not heard before from our students. Marissa became our Oliver, and throughout the rehearsals and performance of the show, she blossomed as a performer, a student, and a valued member of our school community. Ahhh, the power of Arts Education.

In many ways, our schools can be very narrow places. The avenues to success tend to be few and very specific. There's reading and writing, and there's math -- and as the curricular demands in each of those areas increase, little else remains. If those paths aren't your favorite or most comfortable roads to go down, you are probably in for a long journey. As a teacher, I believe it is of the utmost importance that our kids are successful in all of those academic areas, but at the same time I know that it must be a priority for us to open up and widen the paths to success, or risk losing so many dynamic young people. It is the duty of schools to expand the minds of our students, but we also have the chance to expand their spirits and their souls. It is Arts Education that has the capacity, more than any other field, to break through traditional, narrow boundaries and elevate learning to a truly wholistic experience.

Our production of "Oliver" was a galvanizing experience for the third grade community. Students who had never played with each other on the yard were suddenly singing and dancing together on stage. They were relying on each other to remember where to go onstage, what to sing, and what dance step to do. Students who were often on the boundaries in other school endeavors were suddenly front-and-center, leading the way. All of students experienced newfound confidence and inspiration as they memorized lines, learned songs, and imagined themselves in a world so different than their own. They experienced an audience laughing at

humorous lines or gestures, and clapping for them wildly as they finished a song. The opportunity to know what it's like to have a crowd of a few hundred people cheer for you and your accomplishment is a truly rich and unique human experience. Of course, it was not only the kids who were a part of this experience, but the adults as well. Just as the student community came together, so too did the parents. From the sets to the props to the costumes, moms and dads came out of the woodwork to bring our production of "Oliver" together. It was in every way a community effort. And, at the end, everyone involved in the experience knew that they had been a part of something special.

I know there are many teachers, and even parents out there who would question whether such a production is worth the academic time it takes to accomplish. In my six years teaching, I've done four productions like "Oliver" with kindergartners and third graders, and I have never felt for one minute that anything was sacrificed. Certainly, producing shows like these takes time, but the gains are huge, and the success always follows into the classroom. Performing a show like "Oliver" is not easy; it takes a great deal of work, effort, imagination, and patience. But the focus, work ethic, and confidence that comes from such an effort always follows into the work of the classroom.

Ultimately, however, I believe the role of arts in education is not to elevate the quality of readers, and writers and mathematicians (though I believe it undoubtedly

does), but to elevate us as people. If we take the arts out of education we run the risk of cultivating a population with a lot of knowledge, but no imagination. Artistic expression is one of the most unique human experiences, and it is one that our schools must not leave behind.

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I would teach the children music, physics and philosophy, but the most important is music, for in the patterns of the arts are the key to all learning.

- Plato