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# Engaging boys in literacy through the creative arts in a multiage classroom.

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Increasingly, we have become aware that the creative arts offer a significant avenue for expanding boys' literacy experiences. Furthermore, the creative arts offer opportunities for engaging boys – and, for improving the likelihood of various educational outcomes. We propose in this paper that the creative arts are particularly well suited to multiage classrooms that value inquiry learning, building relationships and developing a community of learners. Drawing on the example of a musical performance, we discuss here some literacy experiences that can be fostered within a multiage frame.

While our focus is on the value of the creative arts for engaging boys in literacy experiences, equally important is noting a growing body of research articulating the importance of the creative arts on cognitive, emotional and social development (see for example Efland 2002; Richardson et al 2003; Schellenberg 2004; Parsons 2005; Ashbury & Rich 2008; Gazzaniga 2008). Additionally, some of the most intriguing findings from a growing body of neuroscientific work suggests that the creative arts has a positive impact on the capacity to redefine and enhance many facets of educational practice (Weinberger, 1998; Robinson 2001; Ashbury & Rich 2008; Franklin et al 2008). While there is emerging recognition of the significance of the arts, traditionally schools have a long and continued history of privileging maths and science. It is suggested however that teachers can provide creative cultural experiences in daily practice through the facilitation of activities such as a class musical.

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## The Musical – ‘How Does Your Garden Grow’

The musical ‘How Does Your Garden Grow’ was produced and performed by a group of 321 students who were familiar with the teacher’s emphasis on supporting, growing, discovering and working together (Magee, 1995). Moreover, the community valued flexible groupings, incidental and explicit cross age tutoring, an integrated curriculum and the development of strong relationships (Kasten, 1998). The production was guided by students, teachers and parents’ collaboration and interests (Hoffman, 2003). Within a framework of inquiry learning the group constructed questions they needed to answer if they were to develop the skills needed to acquire resources they to produce and facilitate their artistic performances. Recognition of all involved with the enterprise as a community of learners was engineered as students recruited parents for many of the musical’s roles.

‘How does your Garden Grow’ fostered experiences in the creative arts that incorporated the visual arts, music, dance and drama. Concurrently, it engaged children in literacy for real purpose. Firstly, visual arts activities included the artistic design and construction of sets and costumes along with visual records of the productions developments. Literacy engagement included the creation of invitations, lists of resources, communication with parents and written records of events. Secondly, musical activities included learning and practicing songs from the repertoire. Literacy was explicit as children read the words to the songs, listened for sounds to emphasize and articulated oral language. Thirdly, dance activities involved exploration with movement and choreography. Written communication was again evident as children recorded the choreography through diagrams and print. Fourthly, drama included learning the lines of the play, developing physical and verbal expression and elocution coaching. Literacy opportunities arose as students practised their lines and followed their peers’ lines. Finally, the musical was becamea catalyst for numerous writing activities as children changed the storyline ending, developed their own characters and wrote their own versions individually and collaboratively within mixed ability groupings.

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## The Outcomes

The class musical was considered an outstanding success in terms of the processes involved, the performance itself, and in engaging boys so strongly in literacy through the creative arts. The experience fostered closer relationships between the children and their teacher, fellow peers, and parents presenting the kind of educative collaboration which is a hallmark of multiage philosophy (Hoffman, 2003). Furthermore, boys were actively engaged in literacy for 'real' world purpose and contributed enthusiastically to all experiences. While research indicates that boys are more reluctant to engage in what they perceive as more 'feminine' pursuits such as the creative arts (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005), the boys involved in this production were motivated and engaged. Furthermore, while narrow versions of how masculinities are constructed, performed and negotiated have been perceived as problematic for many males (Connell, 2000; Connelly, 2004; Keddie, 2006), the boys involved were encouraged to take on unfamiliar roles in a supportive environment that valued risk taking. In the case of 'How Does Your Garden Grow', older boys provided positive mentoring for younger peers - expanding their repertoire of creative arts and literacy experiences.

Two recent studies further highlight the value of the arts for engaging boys in educational contexts. In Australia, a range of creative arts-based initiatives were implemented to improve literacy learning for boys (Alloway et al, 2002). Outcomes indicated that while participation and engagement were increased, there were also real improvements in literacy outcomes. One of the recommendations that emerged from this inquiry was that classrooms accommodate a broader repertoire for engaging and negotiating cultural knowledge and meanings for students (Alloway et al, 2002). In the UK, the challenges of boys' disruptive behaviour, apparent lack of effort and perceived disengagement were addressed through a variety of socio-cultural strategies in a number of schools over four years (Younger et al, 2005). One of the strategies was a central focus on the creative arts and included artists-in-

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residence schemes, poetry weeks, dance sessions run by professional dancers, and drama productions which allocated lead roles to disengaged boys (Younger et al, 2005). It is interesting to note that arts-based strategies were found to benefit students across each participating school and had a particularly significant impact on male under-achievers targeted to take part in the activities (Younger et al, 2005).

Finally, we suggest that an innovative and creative arts curriculum has potential to engage and enhance educational outcomes for all students and particularly for boys who are at risk of underachieving in literacy. The anecdotal example of the production, “How Does Your Garden Grow”, reflects the growing body of research that indicates the value of the creative arts in schools. Moreover, preparing boys to engage in life as men includes understanding that while many boys may not currently enjoy or participate in the creative arts in educational contexts educators can proactively engage practices that expands the repertoire of experiences for boys in creative and cultural pursuits.

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