

In Brief: Evaluative Look at the Implementation of Cool Classics

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This report discusses the pilot experience of a distinctive after-school curriculum called Cool Classics. It was conceived by Mara Tapp, a broadcast and print journalist with a longstanding interest in education, and piloted at a “magnet” school on Chicago’s north side. The model, as implemented, included 18 sessions and ran three days a week. A racially and ethnically diverse group of thirty one preschool, kindergarten and first grade children participated, with the majority being first graders. Instruction was led by Ms. Tapp. She had assistance from an early childhood educator hired for the project, a host school teacher and three older children from the host school.

Cool Classics uses classic children’s literature as the foundation and leaping off point for a rich set of artistic/cultural experiences, tied in some fashion to the story itself. Ms. Tapp puts it as follows: “envisioning each book as being the center of a universe, and then creating galaxies around that central text”. The book chosen for the initial pilot was “The Story of Ferdinand”, written in 1936 by Munro Leaf and illustrated by Robert Lawson. The story is about “a young Spanish bull who isn’t interested in fighting but prefers to sit under a cork tree and smell the flowers”.

Description

The structure of the program involved regular reading and re-reading of the story; enactment of it in different forms (drama, music, dance, art) and exposure to different versions; and discussion of ideas and themes deriving from the story. Professional performing artists and others from the broader community (e.g. a librarian, a book store owner) were recruited to become part of the experience of exploring different manifestations and implications of the story.

During each meeting, usually at the start, participating children gathered for a reading of the story. That reading served to bring children back to the story, in effect to re-constitute the community and the purpose for being there, and was sometimes used for specific educational purposes. For example, during or after the reading the adult leader might initiate a discussion about the action and characters (“What do you think Ferdinand felt when . . .? What did Ferdinand’s mother do in the story?”), about the meaning of particular words (“pasture”, “lonesome”, “fierce”), about the literary structure of stories (narrative, character, mood, etc.), or about a broader question raised by the story (“What do you do when everyone else is doing something that you don’t want to do?” “What do you do when someone looks and acts different than you?”). On one occasion, for instance, the children held a “press conference”, pretending to be reporters asking Ferdinand, his mother or other characters questions; for Ferdinand: “Why didn’t you fight?” “Why didn’t you look before you sat?”, for his mother: “Are you proud of what Ferdinand did?” On another occasion the story was read both in Spanish and English, leading to a discussion of Spanish language.

Beyond -- but linked to -- story readings and exploration, each meeting had a defining activity on site or through a field trip. The group explored different versions of the story, and transpositions of it to different media. Ms. Tapp and staff worked creatively with the idea of different forms and formats, raising them up as part of the learning experience. For example, after children listened to a musical version of the story on CD, she asked them about what changes in a story when “we change the medium, the way it looks or sounds”. Activities included acting out roles/characters in the story, constructing costumes and props (for the final performance), and listening to classical music. On site activities also involved visitors. On one occasion, for instance, the mother of one of the children in the program who is also a painter brought slides of her work portraying insects, which children found fascinating, and which led to discussion of her technique, her particular interest and the process of creating. At one point she told the group, “The fun thing about making

paintings is sometimes you can paint things that you see and sometimes you can paint things that are only in your mind.”

One particularly notable dimension of the program was the opportunity for children to observe and interact with professionals in the arts. Through her connections, Ms. Tapp was able to get a respected theater company to re-stage the musical version of the story just for this group of children, and then conduct acting exercises and activities with the group (e.g. body/voice warm-ups, making animals with one’s hands, expressing emotions non-verbally); to get a trio of professional musicians to perform a musical version live for the group, followed by a discussion of music-making; and to get the well-known children’s singer Ella Jenkins to visit for a performance. In many respects the interaction with artists after each performance were as important a part of the experience as the performance itself. Not many four or five or six year olds have a chance to be led in acting exercises by respected actors or to sit with a prominent conductor while he describes how music is composed and how instrumental ensembles work together. The children were clearly excited and engaged by these experiences, and obviously curious about the performers themselves, their skills and their lives.

The program concluded with a live performance of the story by participating children. Parents and teachers were both invited, and parent and student volunteers recognized for their contribution to the program.

Reflection

The implementation of this curriculum was faithful to the ideas and plans presented in the proposal. Both the basic idea and the interpretation of it in this 18 session program proved sound. The care with which the curriculum was constructed, and the sense of intentionality about activities were impressive. Taking books seriously is meaningful for younger children. A well chosen children’s book can serve as a springboard for exposure to and interaction with rich artistic/cultural material. The premise that younger children can engage complex and at times subtle material, if such material is presented appropriately (an idea broached and explored by Jerome Bruner some 40 years ago now), was strongly supported. Going deeply into learning material is a luxury these days, as is treating learning as an exploration, an experience with no pre-determined outcome. Ms. Tapp and her staff worked hard to create a respectful community, and seems by and large to have succeeded.

In many respects the key to the success of the pilot was the personal skill and vibrant personality of Ms. Tapp. She used that personality to engage children and to pull parents into the experience, whether sitting in on parts of sessions or assisting with sessions. Ms. Tapp was sensitive to each child, and was able to respond to individual interests, needs, strengths and shortcomings. This tangible, non-quantifiable resource contributed to the group’s cohesion, kept the children motivated and interested in the program.

It turned out that exploring and re-exploring a story, day-in, day-out is a very interesting format (and probably only possible with multi-dimensional stories like Ferdinand). A few children did become restless with the daily reading -- and perhaps the story itself -- later in the program. In general, though, it contributed to the sense of coherence, continuity and intentionality of the pilot.

Discussions related to the story were usually focused but open-ended (i.e. with no pre-determined or single right answer) and serious. The discourse was rich and complex, of the type for which there is increasingly little or no time during the school day. As one parent observed, participating in the program gave her a child a chance “to think and talk with other children”. Discussion was not always productive in a narrow or pedagogical sense. But it was important because children were listened to and heard. They had a chance to exercise voice. During a discussion of what a

portrait is, one of the children said that “It could be a picture of two kids acting.” Rather than responding that this was not quite accurate, Ms. Tapp affirmed the child’s effort to answer the question by repeating her answer. After a few more attempts at definition by children, she went on to explain portraits in greater detail.

When the book discussions worked the children were able to connect events in the story to their own experiences, and to a lesser extent the larger world. Some, for instance, were able to make the leap from Ferdinand as being “different” to kinds of differences among people (physical differences, nationality, language, etc.) but a lot of adult structuring was needed for this discussion.

Some guiding questions, and accompanying discussion, may have been too abstract for at least some of the participating children. Likewise, on a few occasions, attempts to use the story and its background to point out moral issues and lessons may have been too much of a developmental stretch. Four to six year old children may well sense the meaning of such concepts as “non-violence” and such events as “the Spanish Civil War”; but it is difficult for children to explore them. Children tend to live at the surface of things. As one child asked, during a question and answer session with the classical music ensemble, “Why do you have that thing on the bottom of the cello?”

Did participating children come to understand at some level that great literature is multi-dimensional? That it can connect people to events, people, activities, ideas outside the story? Did they know they were being exposed to “high culture”, in contrast to the fare they get from the popular media? It is difficult to say. Children tended to take program activities for what they were. The children seemed to particularly enjoy being around people who are really good at something and passionate about what they do.

School administrators and teaching staff remained very supportive of Cool Classics. Parent feedback, ascertained through a brief survey, was strongly positive. Many noted that their children “loved” one dimension of the experience or another, whether reading the story, the field trips or other elements. As one parent noted, “I never thought that reading a story every day would work.” Parents’ comments suggested that they got -- and appreciated -- what the program developer and staff were trying to do.

Two points are worth noting: On occasion it was difficult to balance adult direction and intentions with where children wanted to go. And staffing makes an important difference with a complex learning model like this one. Staff have to get it and to feel it. Ms. Tapp thought carefully about who each child was, what that child was experiencing in the program, and what specifically he or she needed and wanted.