

UNH REPORT

ADVANCING LITERACY
THROUGH THE ARTS:
*Lessons from Settlement
House After School
Programs*



UNITED NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSES OF NEW YORK

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Written by Susan Blank

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What is UNH?

United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) is the membership organization of New York City settlement houses and community centers. Rooted in the history and values of the settlement house movement, UNH promotes and strengthens the neighborhood-based, multi-service approach to improving the lives of New Yorkers in need and the communities in which they live. UNH's membership comprises one of the largest human service systems in New York City, with 38 agencies working at more than 400 sites to provide high quality services and activities to a half million New Yorkers each year. UNH supports its members through policy development, advocacy and capacity-building activities.

ARTS AND LITERACY

United Neighborhood Houses (UNH), the membership organization of New York City settlement houses and community centers, has a longstanding commitment to helping its member agencies use arts programming to enrich the lives of children. In 2007, through the generous support of the E.H.A. Foundation, UNH was able to award one-year arts-related grants of \$5,000 each to seven of its member agencies. The grants, which were subsequently renewed for a second year, focused on the agencies' efforts to advance literacy through arts education in their after school programs.

The grants were a catalyst for programming that was both thoughtful and effervescent. Activities encompassed explorations of literature, multicultural exhibits, choral work, and storytelling.

This report, which provides an overview of the seven projects, has two related purposes: first, to give readers a window into the creative and meaningful enrichment activities that were sponsored by the projects, and second, to highlight challenges faced, problems solved, and best practices used in the course of the projects.

The Rationale for the Projects

WHY COMBINE ARTS AND LITERACY PROGRAMMING?

Evidence is mounting that exposing children to the arts can strengthen their literacy skills. Drawing on a research review, a recent report from the National Assembly of State Art Agencies noted that “what students learn in the arts may help them to master other subjects, such as reading, math, or social studies.”¹ A 2007 study released by the Guggenheim Museum confirmed the value of arts education to literacy, demonstrating that elementary school children who participated in a program to learn about and make art had improvements in a range of literacy and critical thinking skills.² Robert Halpern, a leading expert on child development policies, writes about the many possible pathways between visual and expressive arts activities and literacy education. Among the connections that he points to:

The arts reveal unrecognized abilities in children, which can be a base for strengthening literacy, allowing children to lead from strength, to gain confidence to take risks. Some children express themselves better through other symbol systems than they do through writing and, in so doing, learn they have something to say. In some children, verbal imagination is sparked by visual imagination—expressing something first in pictures, then moving into words. For children who have begun to struggle with literacy,

re-approaching it through and incorporating it into another art form removes some of the psychological baggage that may have begun to accumulate.³

WHY FOCUS ON AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMS?

In many ways, after school programs are excellent settings for literacy-oriented projects.

In the same policy monograph in which he explains how exposure to the arts can promote literacy, Robert Halpern discusses the implications of a study on literacy education in after school programs that he conducted with a colleague. After school programs, he writes, have a “psychological climate, motivational structure, temporal structure, and adult roles [that] make them distinctive – and clearly distinguish them from schools – as literacy-nurturing environments.” These programs provide an environment where children feel “safe” and “accepted” and are therefore willing to take some of the risks associated with learning.⁴

This Report: A Preview

The report opens with brief profiles of the seven arts/literacy projects supported by the E.H.A. Foundation grant. In the second section, the report describes some of the challenges involved in operating these kinds of projects and best practices used to make them as appealing and meaningful as possible to children. That discussion is followed by a section that offers insights from staff and program managers of the seven projects who reflect on how the projects have contributed to the education of children. The report ends with brief conclusions.

The report draws on information gathered through site visits to the seven projects, observations made at UNH-sponsored discussion meetings of project managers, and interviews with selected staff and managers.

The Programs

Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation (CHLDC): Exploring Selected Works of Literature

It is already getting dark, past 4:30 on the kind of grey November afternoon that can bring on fatigue. Still the 15 eighth graders sitting in a discussion circle with their group leader are intent and lively. They have been talking about the Hans Christian Andersen tale of The Little Mermaid since before 4:00 and won't stop until 5:00. “What would have happened if the mermaid had killed the prince?” asks the leader. “She would have felt sad,

guilty,” says one student. The discussion touches on many themes – the image of women in the 1800s, jealousy, sacrifice, religious beliefs. Girls dominate the conversation at the outset, but after awhile, a number of boys add their opinions to the mix. Over the summer, many of the students were part of a theater production based on the Disney version of *The Little Mermaid* and some of today’s discussion focuses on comparisons of the film to the written story. Students agree that the Andersen tale is darker than the Disney version used for their production. “But how many of you would have also been interested in doing a play based on the Andersen version?” probes the group leader. Evidently these eighth graders are not put off by Andersen’s nineteenth-century style and sensibility. Almost everyone’s hand shoots up.

This project involved a number of groups of students of various ages, with each group selecting a piece of literature that the students then went on to explore in depth. Activities included discussions, art projects, watching filmed versions of the work, and groups developing and performing their own theatrical productions of their pieces of literature. Since many of the groups chose works that have been produced as mass entertainment, one main focus of discussions was comparisons of the original material and the popularized versions of the stories, with conversations covering topics such as differences between what the work has meant to its original and contemporary audiences. The students’ performances reflected both their interpretations of multiple versions of their stories and their discoveries about the meaning and value of what they had read.

Hamilton-Madison House: (Hamilton-Madison) Sing It and Spell It

Some 20 kindergarteners take their places on a rug in one of the classrooms of Hamilton-Madison House located in the heart of Chinatown. The teaching artist draws children’s attention to five words written on a big sheet of paper: “few,” “favorite,” “things,” “girls,” and “white.” The children are asked for definitions of the words and helped to put the words in context. (“Who’s favorite color is purple? Raise your hands.”) The children write the words in their notebooks and then the teacher uses a keyboard to lead the group in singing “My Favorite Things”; children follow along with the lyrics, which are posted on another big sheet of paper. Five children have been chosen to represent each of the five words of the day; when a child’s word appears in the song, he or she runs up to the posted lyrics and points to the word. Some children are excited enough to jump up and down in anticipation of pointing to their word. The session concludes with group singing and a final review of the five words.

Sing It and Spell It, offered to children ages 5 through 12, gives students a chance to learn the meaning and spelling of vocabulary words not in isolation, but in the context of taking part in a musical activity. The children are divided into age-based choral groups where they both learn and practice songs to musical accompaniment and learn

about the words in the songs. The teaching artist who leads the group has expertise both as a vocalist and literacy education teacher. Children perform the songs they have learned in a recital for parents.

Lenox Hill Neighborhood House (Lenox Hill): Families of the World and Planet Earth Projects

Exhibit Day (known as *Final Bow*) begins with the screening of a short animated film about Australian animals. Lively, polished, and appealing, the film was made in six weeks by a dozen students in the after school program under the guidance of a professional filmmaker. Once the applause for the film has ended, many students in the audience scatter to their own exhibits. The art on display is diverse – bark painting in the aboriginal style and a style of art known as X-Ray painting from Northern Australia; like the animated film, the visual art displays sophisticated technique, students’ knowledge of the modes of expression in other cultures, and their own-self expression and creativity. Just as impressive, if not more so, is the poise of students who, standing in front of the exhibits, explain their work to visitors and to younger children in the after school program.

The first part of the project in this arts-oriented after school program consisted of three sessions, each one devoted to studying a different region of the world – Russia, Oceania, and Southeast Asia. Children worked in groups co-led by arts specialists and group leaders to create theater and musical performances, arts and crafts, and film related to the area of the world chosen for the session. Each cycle culminated in *Final Bow* exhibits and performances. In the Fall 2008 session, the project shifted to a new three-year curriculum, “Planet Earth,” which is based on the Discovery Channel series. The curriculum allows the program to enrich its basic literacy instruction by using the arts to highlight science and math concepts – for example, by having students in a music class do hands-on experiments to learn about musical pitch.

Jacob A. Riis Neighborhood Settlement House (Jacob Riis): The Comic Book Club

The 20 middle schoolers work in groups of six to eight students. (The program’s activity groups, including this one, are either all boys or all girls.) Some students are drawing, others writing. At this early point in the semester, each student is working on an individual idea for a comic book; later the groups will collectively produce comic books centered on the theme for this year – *If I Ruled the World*. The atmosphere in the room is what group leaders in after school programs like to see – a high energy level without disorder, and with kids focused on the task at hand. Boys in one of the groups are eager to tell a visitor their plans for telling stories about the *Batman* and *Spiderman* figures that they have drawn.

Jacob Riis Settlement House originally began operating the Comic Book Club as a pilot site for the now-national *Comic Book Project*. Based in Columbia University Teachers College, the project offers affiliated programs

a 16-week curriculum and training on how to use it. In addition to giving students an outlet for drawing and learning how to draw, the Club strengthens writing skills by expanding students' vocabularies and helping them understand how words and pictures can convey different but complementary messages. Working in small groups, students in the Jacob Riis Club are guided to design comic books by creating storyboards and writing narratives. Once the books are sketched out, students learn to use the Toon Book storyboarding software program to make the comic books digital. At the end of the sequence, the comic books are first exhibited and then students are given copies of the book that they have helped to produce.

Riverdale Neighborhood House (Riverdale): Young Storytellers Project

The storytellers, half a dozen third and fifth graders, bring the book they have chosen to one of the program's kindergarten rooms. They are a little apprehensive because they know that it can be hard to command the attention of a group of five-year-olds. But they have been prepared. Besides selecting a book that they thought would appeal to the age group, they have practiced reading aloud, initially with a trained storyteller, who gave them reminders, such as to be sure to show children the illustrations and "When you read a word like 'velvet,' make your voice sound warm and soft." During a 10-minute reading stint in the kindergarten, the young storyteller relies on a buddy, another member of the group, chosen beforehand to prompt her if she stumbles over any words. At certain points she pauses and asks the kindergartners, "Do you know what that word means?" The younger children are quiet and absorbed. According to the group leader, one of the young readers can be obstreperous in many after school activities, but as she takes her turn in telling the story, she is animated and positive.

The Young Storytellers Project included weekly training sessions – the first two led by the professional storyteller and the rest by the program's Literacy Arts Specialist – that gave students time to select stories and practice reading them aloud to partners. Like the training sessions, the storytelling sessions themselves were held weekly, lasting approximately one hour. In addition to reading aloud, the storytellers worked with the kindergartners on crafts projects related to the book of the week, and they wrote down stories told by the kindergarten children. After editing by the Literacy Arts Specialist, the stories were transcribed into bound printed books – with room for illustrations – that the kindergartners could keep. The storytellers also wrote their own stories (another activity of their training sessions) and acted them out in a culminating performance for the project.

School Settlement Association (SSA): Poetry Project

The audience is quite large – some 40 to 50 parents and other family members, all of whom are offered a celebratory dinner during this special performance. One by one, some 15 to 20 children are invited up to the stage to read poems they have written. Some kids read fluently, others hesitate,

but all seem proud of what they have done. They and their parents are given colorful booklets that contain the full output of some 75 poems produced during the three-month Poetry Project. The poems are arranged by diverse themes that include "Haikus," "I Am," "Image Poetry," "Rhymes and Silliness," and "What I Like, What I Don't Like." One haiku reads, "The trees are changing/From colors to empty trees/With nothing to hold." A poem on the theme of "I Am" begins: "I am 1 million pictures in one body." Writing on "What is Nature" a student says "I live in New York City/I don't know what nature is/Never seen it/or felt it/or ever heard of it." To begin a poem called "I Know I Am Cool," a student writes, "Stop acting like a fool/Just stay in school."

Children who took part in the four groups of the 12-week Poetry Project ranged from ages 5 to 15, with different groups designated for different age ranges. The groups, which met twice weekly, were led by a graduate student in Educational Theater. During the first four weeks of the Project, students read poems aloud to one another and discussed what the poems meant. Next, students worked on writing their own poems; the goal was for each student to produce four original pieces. During the last four weeks of the Project students chose two of their four pieces for continued feedback, editing and revision – and finally one poem for performance. To prepare for their performances at the Poetry Festival, students practiced reading their poems aloud. The poetry booklets that were distributed at the Festival were professionally printed and contained illustrations by one of the students.

Union Settlement Association (Union Settlement): Rising Stars Theme Teams

At the presentation of the Theme Team recycling project, balloons and student-designed posters dangle from the ceiling, and four tables display exhibits assembled by four age groups of the Rising Stars After School Program. Exhibits for both the youngest and oldest groups center on artwork made out of recycled material. The exhibit of the fourth and fifth grade group is a step-by-step illustration of how students made and decorated recycled paper. Working with a staff member of Concrete Safaris, a group that partners with Rising Stars, second and third graders have assembled an exhibit that shows their plans for "the farm," a community garden and gathering place to be constructed at the East Harlem housing project where Rising Stars is based. Features of the farm shown on a student-made map key include a stage made of recycled tires and a gate constructed of old bottles. According to the Concrete Safari staff member, the planning called on students to use research and problem-solving skills and to think creatively about materials.

Theme Teams engage children ages 5 to 12 in cross-disciplinary projects culminating in presentations that involve text, visual art, research, and performance. A recent Theme Team project ended with each age group of children filling its own classroom with an exhibit focused on a different system of the human body – for example, the skeletal

system or the respiratory system. The exhibits included artwork, diagrams and models, information boards, and puzzles, all made by the students. An earlier Theme Team project, Planet Earth, complemented student research and creative work with field trips to institutions such as the American Museum of Natural History and the New York Public Library.

From the Field: Insights and Advice on Arts/Literacy Programming from the Seven Projects

In an interview conducted for this report, two administrators of an after school program were asked questions about possible challenges encountered in their arts/literacy project – queries about whether there had been problems with finding a good teaching artist and with sustaining students’ commitment to the project. The administrators’ first reactions were, “No, no big difficulties. I guess we were lucky,” and “No, we were fortunate that way – no bad experiences.” But after the interview had brought to light some of the techniques that the program uses to build relationships with outside teaching consultants and to engage children in special activities, one of the administrators said she had changed her mind about her initial answer to the questions:

I guess it isn’t just luck. It’s also what we *do*.

Indeed, the information gathered for this report suggests that strong arts/literacy projects do not just happen; they are a product of careful planning and willingness to learn from experience. Focusing on best practices, the balance of this section presents advice that managers and staff of the seven programs say they would offer to colleagues on how to plan, operate, and improve arts/literacy projects.

The section synthesizes answers to three broad questions that some of the managers and staff of the seven programs considered in group discussions and interviews conducted for this report: 1.) *What do you see as the key ingredients of a strong arts/literacy after school project?* 2.) *How do you keep students committed, over a period of weeks or months, to working hard at arts/literacy activities?* 3.) *What practices promote successful staffing of arts/literacy projects?*

Not surprisingly, not every answer to every question reflects a unanimous opinion, but unless otherwise noted, the observations point to themes that seem to have been important to more than one speaker.⁵

WHAT IT TAKES: *What do you see as the key ingredients of a strong arts/literacy after school project?*

The seven projects took interesting, often innovative,

approaches to using artistic and creative expression as a springboard for helping children improve their reading and writing skills. But how does an after school program know if it is on the right track in designing this kind of project?

To start with a basic, staff say the program should be **fun and engaging**. “Don’t make the project the same old, same old of what children do in school,” advises a manager from Riverdale Neighborhood House. “Kids have already had a long school day,” says a manager from Lenox Hill. “It’s important to change the atmosphere so that they’re not worn out by the last two hours of the afternoon. In designing the project, try thinking outside the box.” Reflecting on CHLDC’s book discussion/performance project, a manager says, “The kids found that they liked throwing themselves into talking about books in an informal setting where they weren’t being evaluated the way they are in school. They were having fun.”

Elaborating on the theme of ensuring that activities engage children, a manager from Union Settlement Association advises making the project **as hands-on and varied as possible**. “Use different approaches to learning – try the Internet or bringing in people from the field to talk to the group, or a movie, or peer-to-peer learning.”

In part because staff think that children will be more engaged in a project if they elect to take part in it, almost all of the projects were at least somewhat voluntary – often one choice among others for time spent in the after school program. But letting children sign up for or volunteer for the activity did not mean that managers expected that it would necessarily have instant appeal. Some managers warn against becoming discouraged when children who have chosen a project seem unenthusiastic or hesitant about it early on. “Give them a chance to warm up to it,” says a Hamilton-Madison manager. “Some children start out being inhibited about arts expression but lose their inhibitions when they see their peers getting involved.” Often a project’s reputation has to build, says an SSA manager. “When we announced that we would offer the Poetry Project for a second year, some kids who had at first been very uninterested clamored to join.”

According to some staff, another element of a strong project is **a framework that has been constructed before the project begins**. While student input can be solicited to shape projects, it is a mistake, says a Lenox Hill manager, to begin with a “blank canvas.” In her opinion, an after school group and its leaders should not be expected to generate ideas without a “thematic jumping-off point.” She explains: “It can take some time for kids to get acclimated to new arts activities. They need to start being fed right away.”

As noted, in its second year of thematic programming, Lenox Hill used a “Planet Earth” curriculum from the Discovery Channel — and similarly, the Jacob Riis project

has centered on the College Comic Book curriculum that is disseminated by Columbia University Teachers College. But managers of these programs recommend a **flexible approach to an off-the-shelf curriculum**. For example, while the national Comic Book curriculum expects group leaders to wait several sessions before they ask students to draw, the Jacob Riis group leader decided that youngsters would get more excited about the project if drawing was introduced at the outset.

In the opinion of several staff members, another key ingredient of a strong project is its capacity to **generate a product**. “Our kids got intensely involved in a single piece of literature through the performances they put on,” says the CHLDC manager. Similarly, the manager of the SSA program reports that a printed book was an important asset to the agency’s Poetry Project. But he advises that projects make a point of building in adequate time for producing a book, performance, or exhibit. In retrospect, he says that his project’s schedule for printing its poetry books was too rushed. “I was running into Kinkos every day for a week to make sure that the book was ready in time for the Poetry Festival.” Another manager points out that when students are in the midst of working on a product like a book, the piece should remain in the classroom – if a child takes it home, it can easily get misplaced.

Another – and more far-reaching – piece of advice about final products comes from the manager of the Lenox Hill project. You shouldn’t be a perfectionist,” she says. “If a kid says, ‘I don’t want to finish this piece,’ that’s fine.” But, she continues:

That piece shouldn’t go up in an exhibit. And if kids say, “We just learned the song on Friday, we’ll practice it at home and perform it on Monday,” tell them, “No, that’s not good enough.” In other words, avoid having a final exhibition or performance present work that a student can’t be *proud of*.

This observation points to one other ingredient of strong arts/literacy programming that staff think is important: Projects should not only be engaging and fun, but they should **have an appropriate degree of rigor**. The next section focuses on how the projects have balanced the needs to keep projects appealing and to use them as sources of growth and learning. A final very important element of successful programming mentioned in interviews and group meetings, **strong staffing**, is examined in the final part of this section.

MAKING DEMANDS, STAYING THE COURSE: *How do you keep students committed, over a period of weeks or months, to working hard at arts/literacy activities?*

Just as restlessness, boredom, and unwillingness to focus on the task at hand can be problems during the regular school day, they can disrupt arts/literacy projects in after school settings. The ingredients of strong projects discussed in the previous section – for example, the

project’s capacity to offer children fun activities that differ from what most of what happens in the school day or to generate a book, performance or other product – are part of the recipe for keeping a sense of purpose, focus and discipline in arts/literacy groups.

Staff offer additional pointers for running rigorous activities. They note that **small groups, reasonably short meeting times, and low staff/student ratios** all make a difference. “Quality over quantity,” says a Riverdale manager, explaining why she was pleased that the storytelling group worked with only a handful of elementary schoolers. “We originally ran Comic Book sessions for 90 minutes,” says a Union Settlement manager, but – illustrating the willingness of many staff from the arts/literacy projects to learn from experience – “when we saw that kids’ attention spans weren’t up to that, we cut back to 30 to 40 minutes.” Several projects have been able to pair regular after school staff or student aides with teaching artists for at least some activities; the teaching artist focuses on learning and content, regular staff members intervene with any students whose attention is lagging. “When a youth worker is on hand,” says one manager, “that person can focus on a kid who’s been given a time-out and help to figure out why the child is having a problem.” Another strategy for keeping particularly restless students on track is **assigning special roles** to them. “Even small requests, like asking a kid to turn on the music or hand out papers, can make a difference,” says one manager.

Another piece of practical advice is to be sure to **keep activities moving**. “Nothing is worse than kids sitting in a classroom waiting for something to happen,” says a Riverdale manager. “We expect a group facilitator to arrive 15 minutes early to make sure that art supplies are ready to go.” A CHLDC manager recalls a session of her project when children who had been asked to act out the story *Stone Soup* fidgeted as they stood in line to put imaginary ingredients into a pot. Illustrating how good after school activities depend on paying attention to group dynamics, the manager says that staff figured out the problem. “Not only were the kids having to wait a long while for their turns, but the students at the back of the line couldn’t see what was happening at the front.” The activity was reorganized.

Some managers and staff recommend **using special practices and arrangements to help structure classes**. At the Hamilton-Madison spelling project, for example, children are positioned around the teacher on their own mats. “In our drama activities,” says one manager of another project, “the curtain opens at the beginning of the activity and closes at the end. The kids have come to expect that.”

However child-friendly the activity, several staff members note that it is important to **be aware of the inherent stresses and demands that literacy work places on some children**. Of course, as indicated by the profiles of the seven programs, a key reason to take an arts- and creative-expression approach to literacy education is to give

children a comfort zone within which they can work on literacy skills: For example, students who write and perform a play about *The Little Mermaid* (in the CHLDC program) then have an easier time reading the Hans Christian Andersen version of the tale; students who successfully write their own comic books (in the Jacob Riis program) or poetry (in the SSA program) are offered a new route into reading.

But even when reading, writing, and spelling are embedded in enjoyable arts activities, literacy work can intimidate students. “One thing that surprised the staff,” according to a final grantee report from the Riverdale Young Storytellers program, was “... the reticence [of the young storytellers] ... to read aloud – particularly because they had all volunteered for the program! They were nervous about mispronouncing a word or embarrassing themselves in front of their peers.” In another example of the projects learning from experience, Riverdale staff devised the approach of breaking the storytellers into pairs, so that one child could help and correct a partner during both practice and read-aloud sessions.

Staff also have advice about the arts side of the arts/literacy combination. They point out that while the arts can be a doorway into literacy improvement, **arts activities should also be taken seriously on their own terms.** Good arts projects place demands on students to master new skills and to work with patience and care – thus, in addition to building literacy, arts activities promote other kinds of learning. The Lenox Hill manager gives an example of how arts activities can help children acquire life skills:

Papier mache is a process that takes more than one session. You do a layer, it needs to dry, you do another layer. Then you apply paint. We know that kids can get frustrated with that process, but we help them see that it all takes time – and that’s important in a culture that’s so driven by the need for instant results.

Another benefit of the project’s arts activities, the manager notes, “is to teach kids problem solving. ‘Your art effort didn’t work out exactly? That happens. Let’s see if you can turn it into something else.’”

Of course, the extent to which an arts/literacy project can foster acquisition of literacy, creative-arts skills, and other kinds of learning depends on the extent to which the managers and staff can **set a pattern of ongoing participation** in the project. Staff face many challenges on this front. “For weeks we were rehearsing a play with a fifth grader as the lead,” says the CHLDC manager, “and at the last minute she told us, ‘My mother says I can’t be there.’ Luckily another younger child who had been watching the rehearsals was able to step in and did a great job.”

While staff are well aware that many absences are unavoidable, they advise doing as much as possible to

convey to parents and students that arts/literacy projects do not lend themselves to children drifting in and out of activities and that culminating events are more than casual affairs. Using one technique to encourage robust participation, the Riverdale program asks parents and children to sign a written contract signifying the family’s commitment to a special after school activity like the Storytelling Project. “When a parent arrives early and is ready to take the child home and out of the group,” says the manager, “we can say, ‘Remember you signed that contract saying that your child would stay until 5:00.’”

Having families take arts/literacy projects seriously depends in part on the willingness of parents and other caregivers to view an after school program as more than a place where children do their homework. Confronted with very busy parents who have limited time for providing hours of homework help to their children, after school programs often must balance interests in offering homework support to students and giving them the kinds of learning opportunities that come from the projects described in this report. Most staff advise **leaving room for homework help but making it clear that the program is determined to offer children other enriching activities that promote learning.**

The final broad question considered in this section focuses on the people who make arts/literacy projects happen – the group leaders and teaching artists who staff them.

GETTING THE BEST FROM STAFF: *What practices promote successful staffing of arts/literacy projects?*

For some arts/literacy projects, staffing falls into place naturally, but often the program must **weigh the pros and cons of bringing in an outside professional, relying on existing staff, or using a mix of the two.** Besides budgetary considerations, staff point to factors such as the interests and talents of regular staff available for the project and the question of whether an outside artist will bring a special flair or sense of excitement to the project. “Our read-aloud project had a group leader who loves reading with kids,” says a manager of the Riverdale project, which used an outside professional only for two initial sessions, “but there have been other instances in which a regular staff member would have viewed a special project like that as ‘just one more thing I have to do.’” In general, staff stress that one of the top requirements for both teaching artists and regular staff is that they **show strong enthusiasm for the project.** “Anyone can tell that our chorus teacher loves what she does,” says a Hamilton-Madison manager, “and that’s very important.” “Our group leaders help to choose the theme of our Theme Team projects,” reports a Union Settlement manager, “and the kids really get the sense that staff are inspired about what’s happening.”

Group leaders who serve as regular staff members in after school programs have typically been chosen in part for their affinity with children and young people, but man-

agers point out that similarly, **the ability to work with children should be a key criterion for choosing teaching artists.** If possible, advises a CHLDC manager, a program should avoid hiring artists with no background in working with children. “For instance, some artists may not be aware of the developmental issues that kids bring to a project.” And some staff recommend that in the process of seeking out an artist with teaching experience, a program should pay attention to whether that person has a track record in putting together culminating events.

At the outset of working on an arts/literacy project, **teaching artists should be given a realistic picture of their students.** “For example,” says one manager, “if you’re interviewing someone to lead a dance project, maybe you should tell them, ‘Don’t expect a whole class of dedicated little ballerinas.’” An SSA manager makes a similar point. “Tell the teaching artist: ‘This won’t be like a class with 20 kids who just sit there and listen to you. You have to be interactive.’” Expanding on the theme of expectations for teaching artists, one manager says that these professionals (and indeed all staff who teach in after school programs) should have a good working knowledge of the socioeconomic conditions and ethnicities of the community that they are working in and of students’ educational needs. “For instance, we have many kids who are reading below grade level and as staff plan their projects, they need to know that.”

One manager recommends that programs **be prepared for conflicting demands on the time of outside professionals.** “Teaching artists are out there in the world, so they bring a validity to these projects, but their other interests and commitments mean that professional opportunities come up for them unexpectedly.” She advises programs to convey to teaching artists that the program will be flexible if sudden professional opportunities get in the way of scheduled activities in arts/literacy projects, but that the flexibility has limits. “Make it clear that ‘we will try to accommodate you but this project is a priority for us.’”

This manager and others underscore that more generally, teaching artists, regardless of their specialty – and indeed all teachers and leaders of arts/literacy projects – will do their best and maintain commitment to the projects if they are confident that **managers have a good working knowledge of their needs and problems.** “If it’s materials, if it’s other resources, if it’s problems of particular students,” says one manager, “you need to know. If you want to retain good staff, you have to support them.”

Signs That It Matters

As suggested by some of the insights from the field that have been presented in the previous sections, the seven projects have experienced their share of problems and challenges as they seek to engage children and families in arts/literacy projects. Staff are well aware that children

can be timid about new activities, or distracted, or begin to drift away from the group. Families can have agendas that make it less than a top priority to encourage their children to stay engaged in special projects. But despite difficulties, as staff look back on their projects, they are heartened by how much has been accomplished. This report ends with voices of staff and managers as they talk about some of the positive contributions the projects have made to the children who took part in them.⁶

During the first round of the theater project, James would give up on the class before it started. But by the second session he had become a major inspiration to his peers by adding humor and charm to the activity. Also his writing abilities improved. He helped to create a large part of the story used for the final performance.

This project taught kids to work cooperatively. In the storyboarding portion of the class Derrick and Willis teamed up to develop part of the script, but Willis got discouraged; he thought his ideas were uninteresting. Derrick immediately reassured him that the ideas were good and that they were going to create a very funny script.

We’ve had very withdrawn kids in the Sing It and Spell It project who would typically answer only “yes” or “no” when asked a question and who had a hard time being active in a conversation. But there they were, enthusiastic about joining in the singing.

We had one child tell us that when she asked kindergarten kids to pick out topics for writing their own books, she was perturbed when some of them wouldn’t do it. But then, she said, she realized that they were shy – and she thought back to how she herself had been initially shy in reading aloud to the kindergarten class but had gradually gained confidence. She said that that recollection made her “more patient.”

Some kids in the Comic Book Project joined because they already liked to draw in their spare time. Others started out drawing only very simple stick figures, but they gradually learned to do illustrations with more definition – and they felt really good about that.

We had one little girl who was simply very sad and who became very engaged in poetry writing. Being able to express her feelings in poems really seemed to help her.

By the end of our Theme Team project, we found from a survey that almost 80 percent of the kids said that they read more often than they had before and over 75 percent said that they’d continue to read on their own. And anecdotally, we saw more kids taking books home – not because of any requirement but because they really wanted to do that.

The schools in our neighborhood do expose children to the creative arts, but class sizes are large and the main focus is on testing. Our project gave students a chance to learn in a

setting where they could be more relaxed and creative than is often possible in school.

Conclusions

The story of the seven projects suggests that creative arts activities that are offered through after school programs can absorb and delight children, can offer them a way to master new skills — and can enliven and enrich literacy education. Still, in a period when budget constraints in the nonprofit world are more severe than at any time in recent memory, settlement houses and other community agencies that operate after school programs may feel under pressure to cut back on these kinds of special arts activities.

But as managers seek out ways to trim their budgets, it is worthwhile to recognize that creative arts for children and arts/literacy projects need not be expensive to be valuable. The relatively modest investment of small grants that was made in the seven projects yielded much more than modest returns in the capacity of these projects to engage and teach children. One experienced program

manager who was interviewed for the report strikes the theme of the way in which “less can be more” for creative arts projects:

For drama and dance activities, use of the imagination is more important than lavish accessories. For instance, if you overwhelm children with costumes in the early stages of putting together a play, they may be discouraged from using their own creativity to construct a performance. If you bring in a few well selected costumes close to performance time, they’ll appreciate it more.

Certainly all the projects that were described in these pages required resources — materials, planning time, and sometimes extra staffing — but in the end, the vitality of the projects depended most heavily on the willingness of their staff and managers to try new ideas and to refine their practice in light of children’s experiences. The strong track records of the seven agencies suggest that even in the midst of very hard times, the after school field should continue to explore the potential of creative arts projects to contribute to literacy education.

ENDNOTES

¹ National Assembly of State Art Agencies. *Critical Evidence: How the Arts Benefit Student Achievement*. Washington, D.C. 2006.
<http://www.nasaa-arts.org/publications/critical-evidence.pdf>

² Randi Korn & Associates. *Teaching Literacy Through Art. Final Report: Synthesis of 2004-5 and 2005-6 Studies*. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. New York, 2007.
http://www.learningthroughart.org/pdfs/Final_Distribution_RKA_2007_Guggenheim_TLTA_report.pdf

³ Halpern, Robert. *Critical Issues in After-School Programming*. Monograph of the Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy, Erikson Institute, Frances Stott, ed. Chicago, 2006, p. 36.
<http://www.erikson.edu/default/research/researchpubs.aspx>

⁴ Halpern, pp. 29-30.

⁵ While the people who were interviewed or took part in the group discussions hold a number of different job titles, this report usually refers to them generically as “managers and staff,” sometimes using the word “staff” as shorthand for both staff and managers. Often quotations from staff and managers identify their agencies, but some quotes are attributed to “a manager” or “staff member,” without further identification.

⁶ Names of individual children in the “Signs That It Matters” section have been changed.

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