

Arts Integration Philosophy

Mime Artist



OPENING MINDS
THROUGH THE
ARTS

I need to be a whole person. What engages my heart, mind and body has always been my connecting point with the process of living. During the past 3 years, I have had the joy of working as one of the Opening Minds through the Arts' Teaching Artists in a uniquely significant program serving the Tucson Unified School District.

What educators and artists do is some of the most significant work in our community. And the coming together in a collaborative effort on behalf of our children, as we do within the workings of OMA, not only enriches the lives of the children, but empowers them with skills that make their achievements in academics so much more successful.

The creative and artistic process as well as that of education, is by its very nature, collaborative. It is a process by which we come to see connections between sometimes seemingly disparate and unrelated concepts and experiences. It affirms that we are whole people.

Through the collaborations of teachers, artists, arts integration specialists, administration, parents and students, I have witnessed nothing less than the beginnings of a transformation of the educational culture within a school, whereby students achieve greater academic successes, discover their own voices, gain access to life long learning and resource skills, all the while, attending to beauty in their daily lives.

The power that the arts hold to open one up to risk personal expression is equally exciting and moving to experience. I remember working with a kindergarten class of which a socially mute child was a member. Outside of the security of the child's home environment, she never spoke. In her home, she spoke fluent, unbroken paragraphs. One day, in one of my classes, I was working with an exercise that matched rhythmic movements with made up verbal sounds suggested by the children. As we went around the circle of children, we began to listen to a child's sound suggestion for the movements we were making, when slowly and softly, the socially mute girl began to utter the rhythmic sound we were using. Gradually, she began to vocalize the sound at a louder volume. She continued this, with an expression of joy and a great smile upon her face, developing the volume to a point of almost shouting the rhythm, completely overshadowing the sounds made by the rest of us. Needless to say, I was overjoyed with her response, as were several weeping teachers. But the emotion and delight of that moment, was only the beginning of a life long breakthrough. I learned, later, that she began to speak up in any environment she was in, adding to her classroom from the moment of returning to her class routine that day of rhythmic vocalizations.

Through creative play, I see children enter into non-judgmental processes that employ exploration, discovery and risk taking as a framework of inquiry. This is essential to the fostering of life long learning and a sense of strong self-esteem. As well, the creation, exploration and practice of art necessitate participation in processes that are cooperative and collaborative in nature, allowing for the emergence in the life of a child a sense of mastery of skills and tolerance of others.

Through the practice of art children are encouraged to entertain multiple and at times, seemingly disparate points of view. It is through participation in the arts in the educational setting that children make inter-curricular connections as well as the larger connections between self, others and their environments, empowering them as life long learners and holistic members of their communities.

Educators, too, are renewed in their commitment to their vocations, enjoy teaching more and feel empowered in fulfilling the task of guiding the children in their charge. I have seen teachers begin to collaborate with one another to create vitally meaningful arts-based units that integrate science, math, language arts and geography such as one on Egypt in which sixth grade students explored geometry to replicate pyramids, compared hieroglyphics with syntax and grammar and mummified Cornish hens while creating and decorating sarcophagi that would serve as their final resting place. Using chant and dramatic performance, the unit culminated in the ritual reenactment of final rights of passage for the Egyptian dead.

Arts integration in education offers artists and educators life giving opportunities to collaborate with peers and to renew the first fire, the first passion that brought us to education and the arts. We are the keepers of that fire. And it is nothing less than that fire that must be endowed to our children and to our children's children.

As fostered through programs such as Tucson Unified School District's, Opening Mind through the Arts, arts integration in education is not a meaningless cause. It is a cause of great weight and importance. It is the cause of our children and the future world they stand to embrace.

Rick Wamer