



IN THE NEWS



ACS Head Start and NYU's CREATIVE ARTS TEAM: Drama for Early Childhood Literacy Development

By Angel Sands Gunn, Spring 2003

Gallatin's Creative Arts Team (CAT) celebrates its tenth year in partnership with the Administration for Children's Services/Head Start. Under the leadership of Head Start's Deputy Commissioner Marilyn Bartlett and CAT's NYC Wolf Trap/Early Learning through the Arts Program Director Karina Naumer, this partnership entitled "Drama for Literacy" has served over 5,000 New York City Head Start students and has trained over 500 Head Start teachers since 1993.

Under this partnership, CAT's actor/teachers take residence at a Head Start site for a total of 26 days. During this time, they enact classroom dramas that involve students in role-play, puppetry and arts activities to promote literacy. CAT's curriculum supports national recommendations and state standards for literacy acquisition, and during residencies, students practice oral language use, problem-solving, letters, sounds, mapping and comprehension skills.

This year's curriculum includes the drama story entitled "The Magic Drum." Based on a Nigerian folk tale, this drama explores the conflict of inclusion/exclusion that occurs when a magic drum falls into the hands of the greedy tortoise Ijapa. The drum magically creates all of the food for the community in a time of draught. When Ijapa begins excluding groups of animals from her feasts, the animals meet together to address Ijapa's behavior. The students, in the roles of Nigerian animals, identify their feelings and communicate their opinions and ideas in order to develop a plan that impacts the outcome of the story.

Within this context, students explore the New York State Language Arts Performance Standards E1: "Recognize how written language may communicate feelings" and E2: "Communicate ideas to others through writing." For example, one literacy activity within the drama occurs when Ijapa isn't taking care of the drum. The Nigerian animals show Ijapa how to treat the drum correctly and then make a list of these items so that the tortoise won't forget. Outside of the drama, students write statements about their feelings towards Ijapa and place these statements and illustrations on a mural board entitled "The Magic Drum Feelings Board."

CAT currently works with six Head Start Centers throughout the city including Bobov Worldwide Head Start, East Harlem Head Start, Rockaway Head Start, United Methodist Head Start, YM/YWHA of Williamsburg Y Head Start, and East Side House Head Start.

Ultimately, residencies not only build students' language skills but also train Head Start teachers to use literacy-enhancing drama activities on an ongoing basis. Under CAT's guidance, teachers practice implementing educational drama strategies such as bringing favorite storybooks to life. Teachers take on a central role within the book of their choice and lead the students to enact the tale. Teachers have risen to this challenge with vigor.

One teacher from Escalara Head Start in Manhattan asserted, "I never really knew how much fun drama could be – especially for its use in a pre-school classroom. This program helped us open up our artistic and creative sides."

This year's residencies will culminate in a breakfast symposium at NYU on April 15. Teachers from all six sites will share highlights of what they have learned about implementing drama within their classrooms. Teachers show excerpts of video or slides and enact portions of the drama-based lesson plans they developed under CAT's guidance. In the past, teachers have brought in props and costume pieces and, in some cases, entire murals demonstrating how they turned their classrooms into a fictional world.

This year, CAT's 26-day Head Start residency also trains Education Directors to supervise and sustain the use of drama at their sites. For example, Education Directors use an assessment tool created by Mitalene Fletcher (CAT Assistant Education Director). This rubric asks them to observe the implementation of the drama and then to identify activities which contribute to aspects of literacy - such as phonological awareness and reading skills.

Last summer, CAT was honored to present highlights of this partnership at the annual American Alliance of Theatre and Education (AATE) conference in Minneapolis, MN. Karina Naumer (CAT Program Director) and Andrea Dishy (CAT Assistant Program Director) shared the Head Start model as an example of the sustainable benefits of long-term relationships with educational partners.

In a recent federal review of ACS Head Start, one evaluator applauded both CAT and the NYC branch of ACS Head Start for what he called an example of "best practices" for early childhood education.