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EXPRESSIVE ARTS AS A MEANS OF INCREASING WELL-BEING IN CHILDREN

BY

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Undergraduate Thesis
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Approved by:

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to discover the extent to which expressive arts increase well-being in children. Expressive arts are being defined here as theatre, dance, art, and creative writing. Well-being is defined as self-efficacy and self-worth. The project was carried out in a four-week expressive arts program designed to teach fifth grade elementary school students a variety of artistic disciplines (i.e. theatre, dance, art, and creative writing). Both before and after the workshop, the students completed measures of self-worth and self-efficacy; these measures were used to identify changes in students from the beginning of the program to the end.

Although we found no statistically significant differences between the pretest and the posttest on these measures, the qualitative results are promising. Students rated this experience as highly enjoyable, with no rate less than a seven out of ten, and a mean rate of 9.36 out of ten. Students also communicated their enjoyment through written answers about how the program made them feel and what they thought of the experience.

“Children are not blank slates upon which we can slab methods and plans, but particular individuals who bring their lives with them into the classroom, who are not empty vessels, but bodies composed of memories, beliefs, values and experiences unconsciously and consciously embedded within their internal geography” - Higgins, 2012, p. 455

Significance Statement

The presence of expressive arts programs in schools is likely to positively impact students' well-being. In the words of Spelke (qtd. in Posner, 2009), “Educators need to take diverse sets of human endeavors and present them to varied groups of students in a way that engages them, enables them to teach themselves, and allows their interest and knowledge to grow.” By implementing expressive arts programs, educators would be able to more effectively engage and enable students while growing their interests in a variety of subjects because the arts allow children to develop their self-efficacy and self-worth, which are important attributes that will follow children into their future. If those attributes are strong within them, they will become more successful and happier adults. Also, with a solid foundation of well-being, children are better able to positively combat adversity and embrace diversity.

Educators, especially those in elementary education, are faced with the task of teaching many subjects in a limited amount time. Due to these restrictions, educators can overlook certain aspects of a student's personality and skill-set. “[Through expressive arts] educators gain essential information about a child's true feelings that he or she would not otherwise reveal and are provided an avenue for learning about the child in a non-threatening way” (King & Schwabenlender, 1994, p. 13). Thus, instruction in expressive arts would serve a dual purpose: enhancing skills of well-being in students and allowing the teacher to better understand his or her students.

Children need an outlet for their emotions and a place to build well-being. According to King and Schwabenlender (1994), “allowing children to be expressive provides them with a sense of empowerment [because children] are encouraged to express their emotions constructively” (p 13). Further, Higgins (2012) conducted research in which she used expressive arts to educate students on the emotional self; she states: “It has long seemed quite apparent that a child’s ability to learn is affected by the way(s) a child feels about him/herself. There is an inherent emotionality involved with learning and teaching, and the way in which emotion and power work in the act of educating is a primary factor in its effectiveness” (p. 454). Higgins goes on to argue that expressive arts are important in the classroom because children learn better when the arts are present. Furthermore, some research has been done showing that brains can be rewired in constructive ways through education in the arts: “If we are able to engage children in an art form that they are open to and for which their brain is prepared, then we can use it to train their attention, which seems to improve cognition” (Posner, 2009). Some of the positive effects expressive arts have on learning are due to the focus, which is required while performing/producing art. Providing children with the arts, then, allows them to develop their focus skills and transfer those skills to other quantitative subjects.

The implications of our research for public policy extend far and wide. Largely, expressive arts could easily be incorporated into Common Core, a collection of guiding standards that emphasizes reading and math. Currently, there is no expressive arts component in Common Core (“Read the Standards”). While reading and math are important skills for any field, expressive arts could be integrated into existing standards just as Indian Education for All has been integrated into Montana’s standards. For example, in math standards if students were asked

to describe geometric shapes those students could easily use expressive movement to form and thus describe shapes.

On global scale, we hope this program could be used to increase school attendance, enjoyment, and engagement for the students. Its simplicity and accessibility make it perfect for regions of the world where student resources are limited-- the only thing really needed is a commitment from the teacher to the children's work and creating a safe environment.

Children are the best resource this world has; they must be provided the tools they need to be successful adults. Our research advocates for the importance of expressive arts in the schools. We have added to the research about the positive benefits of the arts through our in-class program, which focused on enhancing well-being in the students.

Literature Review

Expressive arts benefit children. However, with public education lending more emphasis to subjects such as mathematics, science, and reading, expressive arts are in danger of being overlooked. Our research focuses on the positive effect of expressive arts on children's well-being. Broadly, we define expressive arts as dance, drama, visual arts, and creative writing; well-being we define as self-efficacy and self-worth.

Expressive Arts

Expressive arts involve a multimodal process of therapy, healing, and self-actualization (Expressive Art). This creative process allows individuals to progress at a personal pace (ANZATA). It also provides the opportunity for individuals to explore their emotions and inner selves in order to deal with stress, explore issues, and improve self-esteem through healthy and creative modes (ANTAZA). Expressive arts provide a safe environment for people to express, manage, and cope with their emotions. Some of the subject areas of expressive arts include

creative movement and dramatic play. Creative movement is guided movement through specific prompts that incorporate the elements of dance: Body, space, time, energy, and motion (Kaufmann & Ellis, 2007). Dramatic play involves an imaginary setting and specific roles and rules (Hatcher & Petty, 2004, p. 79).

Aspects of dance movement therapy, drama therapy, and art therapy are incorporated throughout the process of expressive arts. Each art discipline contributes to expressive arts' positive effect on children's physical wellness, cognitive development, academic success, and emotional well-being, as outlined by a report by the College Board. Physically, students' fine motor skills are increasing at elementary grade levels. Expressive arts provide an opportunity for students to master these skills through various techniques, for example: dance provides students with movement techniques, and visual arts contribute to fine motor skills by having students manipulate pencils and paintbrushes.

Students are developing important social skills at an elementary level. Unfortunately, confidence begins to decrease in elementary-aged students. Working with expressive arts allows for a safe environment and working with other students "can enhance social and emotional skills including conflict resolution and empathy" (The College Board, 2012, p. 6). The opportunity expressive arts gives children to express and explore their emotions "can be seen as a safe method of communication that involves creativity and exploration" (Higgins, 2012, p. 461). Thus, partner work through expressive arts gives students' a safe and creative environment to improve their social skills.

The inherent creativity of expressive arts fuels children's overall development (The College Board, 2012). To illustrate, a group of sixty juvenile offenders "reported significant gains in confidence, tolerance and persistence related to the dance experience" after taking dance

classes twice a week for ten weeks (Bonbright, Bradley, & Dooling, 2013, p. 8). This research provides evidence that expressive arts are beneficial to students. Expressive arts provide an outlet for expression and for expansion of ideas that simultaneously cultivates creativity, cognitive reception, social interactions, and well-being.

Well-Being

Well-being has not been consistently defined as it pertains to children. However, current research leans towards discovering a holistic explanation of what contributes to the well-being of children (Pollard & Lee, 2003). A holistic approach takes into account five distinct domains: physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and economic. Within each of these domains, well-being has been defined on a continuum from positive to negative. For example, physical positives may be good health, nutrition, and personal body care, while negatives may be physical abuse, physical manifestations of stress, and illness. The psychological domain has more negative indicators than positive. These may be aggression, depression, distress, or anger. Positives include competence, cheerfulness, and life satisfaction (Pollard & Lee, 2003). The social and economic domains are highly focused on peer/family relationships and interactions.

Although well-being is difficult to define, for the purposes of this research, we will define it as self-efficacy and self-worth. We will use previous research to aim at a holistic approach to well-being.

Expressive Arts and Well-Being in Children

Five distinct domains of well-being exist: physical, social, psychological, cognitive, and economic. We decided to focus on psychological well-being primarily, as psychological well-being is the most malleable in academic situations. While each have positive and negative

indicators, the psychological domain has more negative indicators than the other domains (Pollard & Lee, 2003), making it easier to study with deficit indicators.

By introducing an extra segment of expressive arts into schools, we hope that expressive arts will give children the aptitude to repair current or future deficits in their well-being through improving the child's self efficacy in peer-interactions as well as their global self-worth. Dance gives children an enjoyable outlet to express their individuality. Drama gives students perspective in that they act out a character's choices. Creative writing gives children an alternative mode of expression. Art provides children proficiency in communicating what they dream, fear, or know; further, art activities "promote self-esteem, self-confidence, and feelings of acceptance and success" (King & Schwabenlender, 1994, p. 8).

There is a marked difference between how an adult sees a child, how other children see a child, and how a child sees himself or herself. This causes a challenge as to how to monitor and gauge a child's success without hindering his or her creativity. Fortunately, we can model our evaluations after pre-existing evaluation. For example, in Hong Kong, researchers carried out a 16-week study using expressive arts to discover the links of drama education to improved creativity, social skills, and overall self-worth (Hui & Lau, 2006, p. 34). The study used storytelling, dramatic play, and puppet making as its main ways of expression. The researchers found that through the additional exposure to the arts, the children showed significant improvement on creative and cognitive tests in comparison to the children's prior levels. "It is in the art experience that the child discovers or misses a sense of achieving, a sense of expressing, a feeling of adequacy, a feeling of pleasure, and a new psychological meaning or attitude" (McSwain, 1953, p.126). Thus, through expressive arts, children are learning skills to positively increase their well-being.

Method

Participants

A local classroom of twenty-eight fifth grade students participated in our study. Of the data collected, 11 were female (44%) and 14 were male (56%). We conducted the study with a total of 28 students, however three participants were removed from the data because they did not complete both the pre- and the post-measure. Thus, the final sample consisted of 25 students. The average student age was 10.36 with a standard deviation of .490. Students signed a minor's assent form to participate in the study; through this form, the students agreed to participate in the study and allowed us to take data from their experiences. We informed parents and guardians of our research through a friendly study announcement that was given with a parental consent along with the minor's assent forms to each student. These forms have been kept separate from our measures in order to maintain confidentiality.

Measures

Because we worked with young children, we made sure the measures we used to define well-being were neither too mature, nor too straightforward. We hoped to see significant positive increases from the beginning of the study to the end in regards to the students' well-being, as distinguished by both the measures we used and written data collected from the students.

We began the measures by providing a cover page for the students which explained the confidential nature of their responses and thanking them for participating. The students continued to a demographic page where they were asked their gender, age, and who they live with.

The first measure used is a subscale of "Children's Self-Efficacy in Peer Interactions" (Sabatelli, Anderson, & LaMotte, 2005). This is a self-evaluation created specifically for

children in grades 3-8. It measures self-efficacy in both conflict and non-conflict situations. Going from EASY! to HARD!, the children are asked about their abilities in a non-threatening and age-appropriate manner. This subscale has a total of 22 items, with 10 items related to self-efficacy in non-conflict situations and 11 related to self-efficacy in conflict situations. An example of an item related to non-conflict situations is “You want to start a game. Asking other kids to play the game is ___?___ for you.” For conflict situations, an example of an item is “A kid is yelling at you. Telling the kid to stop is ___?___ for you.” This test has a reliability of alpha equal to .85. The higher the student’s score on this measure, the better the student’s self-efficacy in peer interactions.

The second measure we used is a subscale of “Self-Perception Profile for Children” (Sabatelli et al., 2005); ours tested Global Self-Worth. It measures how children in this age group feel about themselves and about their place in the greater social scene. It asks children to put an *x* in a box labeled either “really true for me” or “sort of true for me,” while also allowing them to put a positive or negative spin on the data presented. This measure contains 6 items. An example of an item on this measure is “Some kids are often unhappy with themselves, but other kids are pretty pleased with themselves.” Students picked one side of the sentence to put “really true for me” or “sort of true for me.” The reliability for this test is alpha equal to .84. This test is designed for grades 3-8. The higher the score on this measure, the higher the child’s self-worth.

At the end of the program, students completed a page describing which activities they participated in, how many days they were in attendance, if they participated in the variety show, what they thought of the experience, and rated their time on a scale from one to ten. These questions are used to gauge student enjoyment and to qualitatively look at the program from the student’s perspective.

Procedure

The program (see appendix) was conducted over the course of seven forty-minute periods in the classroom. The first session consisted of the students completing the measures and deciding on a theme. The participants chose “fantasy sports” as their theme for the program, which was interpreted as various fantastical characters playing sports. The next session focused on learning the students names and exploring the different stations with the students. The stations included in the study were dramatic play, creative movement, visual arts, and creative writing. Students were able to move from one station to another, both within a session and between different sessions. Students were not required to participate in each activity; they had complete choice. We spent a total of four sessions actively involved in artistic creation. During these sessions, students worked on solidifying the piece they would like to share on the final day and simply being creative. The final day was composed of a variety show where students were able to share their work with the class. No student was required to participate in the variety show, but participation was encouraged. The class had a total of thirteen different groups share their creative endeavors. There was at least one performance of every station. Shortly following the variety show, we administered the measures a second time.

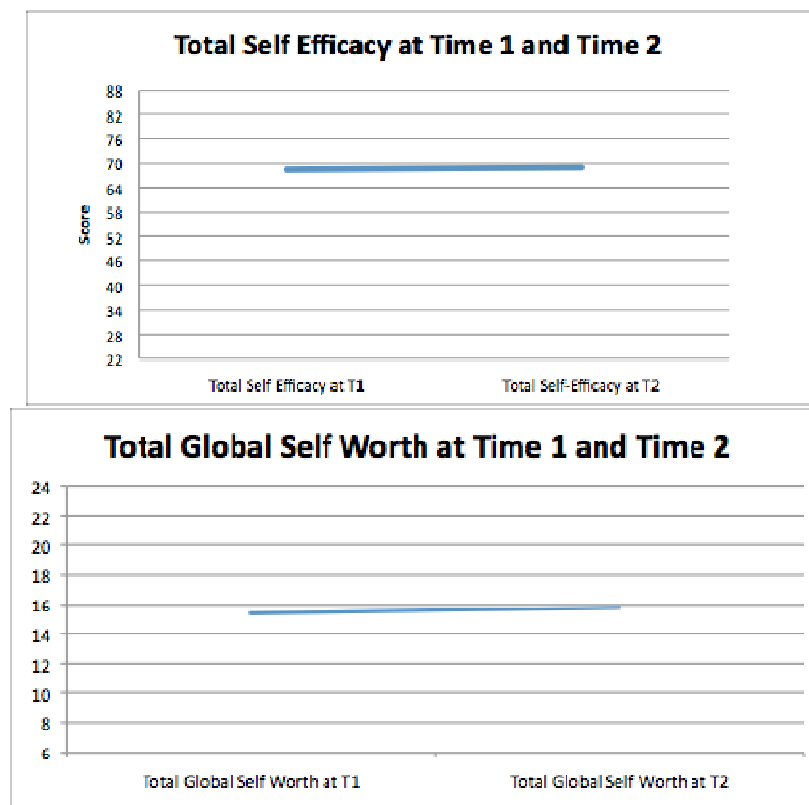
Results

Both in the pre- and the post-measures, the total efficacy in peer interactions had 22 items, resulting in a total score from 22-88; the global self-worth had 6 items, resulting in a score from 6-24. We analyzed the averages for time one and time two on both of these measures. The mean total efficacy time one was 68.34 with a standard deviation of 10.62. The mean for time two was 68.96 with a standard deviation of 11.32. The mean for global self-worth for time one was 15.36 with a standard deviation of 1.60; the mean for time two was 15.80 with a standard

deviation of 2.14. Finally, we separated out the self-efficacy measure to take into consideration self-efficacy in conflict and non-conflict situations. The mean for conflict self-efficacy for time one was 37.94 with a standard deviation of 6.51; the mean time two was 37.86 with a standard deviation of 6.36. The mean for non-conflict self-efficacy for time one was 30.40 with a standard deviation of 4.98; the mean for time two was 31.10 with a standard deviation of 6.36. See table and graphs below.

Measure	Average Score	Standard Deviation	N
Total Self-Efficacy in Peer Interactions at Time 1	68.34	10.62	25
Total Self-Efficacy in Peer Interactions at Time 2	68.96	11.31	25
Total Global Self-Worth at Time 1	15.36	1.60	25
Total Global Self-Worth at Time 2	15.80	2.14	25
Conflict Efficacy at Time 1	37.94	6.51	25
Conflict Efficacy at Time 2	37.86	6.36	25
Non-Conflict Efficacy at Time 1	30.40	4.98	25
Non-Conflict Efficacy at Time 2	31.10	5.67	25

Note: No statistically significant difference emerged.



To test the hypothesis that students who participated in this program would experience an increase in self-efficacy and self worth, a one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted. The within-subject measures were total self-efficacy in peer interactions, efficacy in conflict situations, efficacy in non-conflict situations, and global self-worth. The average scores at Time 1 and Time 2 for all measures were compared. The results indicated no significant differences between Time 1 and Time 2 in any measure.

The students expressed a great amount of enjoyment in this program. On a scale of one to ten, students rated the experience at an average of 9.36, and no students rated the experience lower than seven out of ten. Furthermore, students responses to the question “What did you think of this experience? How did it make you feel?” showed how the experience was positive and enjoyable for the students. Some of the quotes from the student’s papers are: “I thought it was REALLY fun. When I saw other kids being silly I felt much more comfortable being silly around

my class.”; “I was really excited and really happy. And I was having fun.”; “I loved this! This was really fun for me. I loved the stations you guys set up for us. I really felt like you could be yourself with no one laughing at you or being mean!”; and “I’ve always looking forward to it.”

Discussion

On a global scale, we believe that this program could be used as a way to increase school attendance and enjoyment. Global self-worth and self-efficacy in peer interactions may not be problems of primary concern for many children in developed education systems in the world today. Many schools in developed regions are far more interested in making education relevant to their respective communities than the ideals of global self-worth. However, while there were no statistically significant results as far as a change in the student’s perception of self-worth or self-efficacy, there was overwhelming evidence that the students enjoyed the program. No matter what we were doing that day, the children were engaged with the material, offering suggestions or trying to create dialogue around their art.

This program could be effectively used as an incentive to keep students engaged in their schooling. The qualitative evidence showed enjoyment as well as the children taking charge of their expression without fear of being mocked. As one child said, ‘It made me feel good. It made me feel like I could do what I wanted to if I tried.’ That belief in their own power was something we used to go forward.

Furthermore, research conducted by Harland, Kinder, Lord, Stott, Schagen, and Haynes (2000) found similar results with secondary students, that arts created a “positive and enjoyment-oriented atmosphere” in the school and encouraged “school attendance and increased motivation” of students involved (p. 237) (p. 242). Clearly, this program and Harland et al. helped students feel empowered, and in schools that deal with marginalized or historically

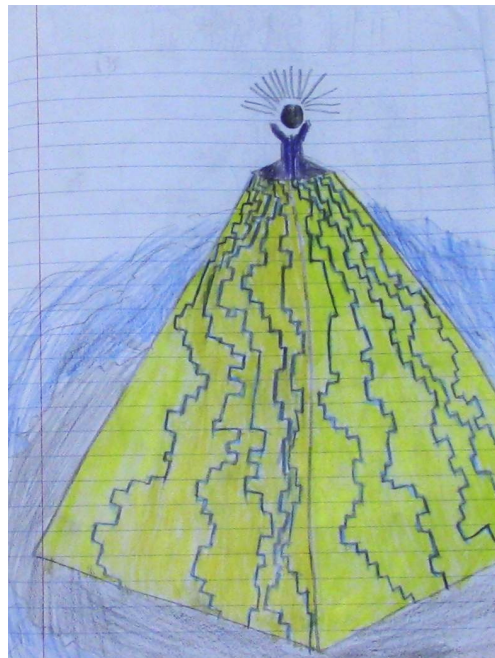
oppressed groups, this could be a tremendous tool for giving those students agency in a context where they have usually been denied access, which we hope could help further them in a global market.

In addition, this tool could be used as a quick and effective way to understand the children. For a substitute teacher, perhaps, or for teachers just opening a school-- the children's work is an insight into their lives-- if teachers could more readily grasp this, then they could find other techniques to effectively control and adequately support their students, without subjecting them to any standardized test. We believe that in situations such as short-term Peace-Corps or educational assignments around the world, this could be a really simple tool to build rapport quickly and make transitions easier for all involved.

APPENDIX

Arts for the Kids

Expressive Arts for the Well Being of Children



Resource Packet

Danielle Barnes-Smith, Jordan Frotz, HanaSara Ito, and Emily Vascimini

**The University of Montana
Global Leadership Initiative**

April 2015

About this Resource

Many communities have schools that lack a way to give children enjoyment and agency in education. Especially in places where schooling is not mandatory, making school enjoyable could be a key tool in improving school attendance and satisfaction. In addition, it could be a useful way for teachers to understand their students more fully. We believe that this program could accomplish these goals without placing undue burden on the teachers or professionals administering educational/daycare programs.

Enclosed are the materials to get you started with an expressive arts program. It includes a small explanation of each station as well as a couple of sample exercises. You can have students select a theme or not. The important thing is that the children get a choice as to which they would prefer-- and remember that these are only samples. If the children get an idea that they would like to do, support them and try to find a way to integrate that into the program. The keys to its relevance and success are flexibility and student agency.

We hope that you have as excellent results as we did, and that this can be an effective and inexpensive classroom resource. Good luck!

Best Wishes,

Danielle Barnes-Smith, Jordan Frotz, HanaSara Ito, and Emily Vascimini

The University of Montana, Global Leadership Initiative, 2015

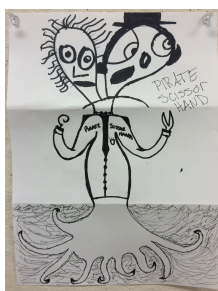
Visual Arts Station

This station is focused on students getting a chance to express themselves through visual arts. Students draw their ideas related to the chosen theme (if you have one). Depending on materials available, various mediums can be offered to students. More or less mediums can be used depending on resources. The adult at the station should focus on helping students come up with their own ideas that relate to the theme and providing support for students. Many of children do not get enough time to simply draw, so often they will not even need any prompting.

Materials

- Pencils
- Erasers
- Sketch paper
- Colored pencils
- Crayons
- Marker paper
- Markers

Example Activities



Students who are unsure of what to draw could be engaged in a drawing activity called “Exquisite Corpses.” Gather a group of people, it could be as many as you want but there must be at least three, and have them sit in a circle. Each person should have a piece of paper, which they fold into thirds. The top third is used for the head, the middle third for the body, and the final third for the feet. For three minutes, everybody uses the top third of the paper to create a head, after the time is up, they draw two small lines to the middle third to show where the neck goes. Everyone should fold the paper so only the middle third is showing and pass the papers to the right. Now, for three minutes, everybody draws a body. After time is finished, two lines should be drawn to the bottom half to show the next artist the waist line and the paper is folded so only the bottom third is showing. A final three minutes are used to draw the legs of the corpse. Now the paper is opened up and you can look at the exquisite corpse everyone created. Students can even name the drawing they created!

Another fun game to play with students who need more prompting to begin drawing is like Simon Says. In Simon Says, “Simon” (the leader, the adult in this case) says to do something and everyone must do it. When giving a prompt that must be followed, Simon must say “Simon says...” and then the prompt. Simon sometimes gives prompts without first saying “Simon says...” and these prompts are not followed. To make this a drawing activity, all the students take out a piece of paper and their choice in colored pencil, Simon instructs them to begin drawing something, for example, “Simon says draw using only circles.” Simon can give some prompts that do not get followed, “Draw squares.” Simon continues giving prompts until students are ready to draw something on their own.

Example Prompts:

- Simon says to move all pencils to the right.
- Simon says to draw with your opposite hand.
- Simon says draw on the back of your paper.

Creative Writing Station

Writing is a core component of most academic subjects, but because of that students can become bored or frustrated with systematic writing. With that in mind, the goal of this station is to encourage students to write creatively and, most importantly, for fun! The adult at the station's main responsibility is to make sure every student feels safe to express himself or herself as well as provide creative prompts or projects if needed.

Materials

- Pencils
- Erasers
- Paper

Optional Materials

- Old magazines
- Dice
- Pictures

Example Activities

When it comes to writing, most students are fairly self-driven, but prompts are generally appreciated. Prompts can be as simple as providing an abstract picture and asking students to give it a story. You can also ask students fun or silly questions (Where would you go if you were a goose for a day? What kind of snacks would you bring for a trip to the Moon?)

A more complicated project is to create da-da poem. Either the adult or the children (or both) will cut out words from an old magazine: make sure to have all parts of speech. Place all the words in a hat. To start, have the student roll two dice: the number on the right is how many lines their poem will have and the number on the left is how many words there will be per line (you can always opt to roll more dice in order to have longer poems). Then, the student draws words out of the hat one at a time and glues them to paper in the drawn order. Then, ta-da! You've become a da-da poet.

Creative Movement/Dance Station

Dance is a great way for people to express themselves. It brings awareness to one's body, helping to encourage familiarity and comfort. Creative movement helps people to think more creatively and abstractly, using metaphor and imagery to inspire movement. The adult at this station should help encourage creative movement and thinking in children by leading dance activities and helping children direct their ideas.

Materials

- Music (optional)
- Scarves, large rubber bands, or anything that can inspire creative movement (optional)

Example Activities

Dance can be a fun and creative way to express yourself and to make connections to the world. These activities strive to encourage children to think abstractly and creatively while becoming more connected with and aware of their bodies.

“Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Imagine that your body is filled with a color and each breath you take makes your color brighter. With each breath out, imagine that you are breathing that color into the air. Now, open your eyes. Your color is moving through your body and to your arms. Toss your arms into the air imagining that you are throwing your color across the room. Spoke your arms through the space, shooting lines of color into the space around you. Now let the color move into your feet...”

Continue this exercise letting the color travel to different body parts (head, belly, shoulders, knees, back, etc.) Use different movement words with each body part. Some examples include spoke, throw, shake, swing, twist, etc. Encourage children to be creative and feel free to repeat body parts and movements as much as you want, giving everyone a chance to explore each movement.

Another fun movement activity is called mirroring. Children work with a partner and face each other. The goal is to move so each dancer does not know who the leader is, the movement happens organically and simultaneously. Dancers should move slowly so they can focus on their partner and make different shapes and use different levels in their mirror dances.

Dramatic Play Station

A subtle but important difference exists between acting and dramatic play-- mainly, that one has a “desired” outcome, and one does not. The dramatic play station is all about the ideas being generated and the enthusiasm (and safety!) of the execution-- this isn’t about acting talent or realism. The adult at this station needs to be able to take in the energy inherent in these types of tasks and channel it into the work at hand, while also being non-judgmental about topics or choices, and helping the kids feel safe. The more high-energy commitment the teacher gives as an example, the more the kids will follow.

Materials

- Whatever the kids want/need to use: props, pencils for ideas, etc.

Example Activities

Dramatic Play is pretty self-sufficient once you get everyone comfortable with each other, but there are barriers to that that need to be broken down. A really good game to play with the kids (especially if there’s a lot of space) is Energy. Start with the kids in a circle, and have them throw an imaginary ball of energy across to another person, making sure that nobody gets the ‘ball’ twice. Do this a couple of times, going in the same order every time so that the kids know who gives them the energy and who they give it to. Then, let them disperse around the room, but they still have to give/receive the energy with the same people. Give them side-coaching, and be as ridiculous as you can get. Some ideas are “Be as small as you can, send the ball as tiny as you can!” or, “make the loudest, silliest noise you can when you send it!” Remember, the adult needs to match the silliness and heighten it as much as they can. If you’re embarrassed, the kids are embarrassed.

Another example exercise that our kids really enjoyed was one that we made up (which you are totally free to do-- the later on in the workshops, the kids will more likely want some control) On three separate little slips of paper, write a place, an activity, and a type of person or fictional creature, depending on what the kids choose as a theme. Do this several times, so that by the end of it, you have three different piles. Tell the kids to choose one of each, and then they have to create a small skit/play based on those three. If you want to do even more, you can bring

a couple of props and say that they have to use it somewhere, or if the theme is a specific word, make them use it in the skit.

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