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Effective Teaching

Breaking Down the Barriers to Learning: The Power of the Arts

By Arline Monks

"I don't do school" is the message -- spoken and unspoken -- from the majority of students entering T. E. Mathews Community School in Yuba County, California.

How that message changes -- sometimes in a matter of only weeks -- came into focus in a year-long study of the project to adapt Waldorf educational methods to the special needs of high-risk delinquent youth attending the Yuba County Court and Community Schools.

The partnership project between Rudolf Steiner College and the two Yuba County schools for juvenile offenders aims at developing a nationally-replicable, Waldorf-based model program. It has been aided in the last few years by grants from the Kellogg Foundation and The California Endowment.

In the study completed last year and funded by The California Endowment, Stanford University researcher Ryan Babineaux points to the nurturing atmosphere of the school and the efforts of its dedicated staff as all-important change agents leading to students' improved attitudes toward learning, better social interaction and "excellent" academic progress (Babineaux, 2000).

The students in question are a challenging group. Between the ages of 11 and 18, most have been expelled or suspended from regular public schools because of violent behavior and criminal activity. Many have learning disabilities and minimal reading and math skills. Getting them to care about school is a major hurdle.

But it is the arts, Babineaux reports, not as a "stand alone exercise (music class or art class)" but integrated Waldorf-style "into every curriculum unit and almost every classroom activity" (p.13) that most powerfully breaks down barriers to learning formed by years of school failure.

"A number of students have said to me 'I can't do math,' yet I have never heard a student say 'I can't do music,'" the researcher writes. "Getting music, as it is presented at T. E. Mathews, isn't about being smart or talented enough, it is simply about being willing to keep trying. . . " (p. 12). And after a few months, many students move from a "get it done" to a "get it right" attitude.

"Shane, for example, is a 17 year old who previously told me, 'I don't do school.' When he first arrived, he refused to write even a single sentence. Yet five weeks later, I was pleased to see him taking charge in his music class."

Shane is in the main lesson room with three other male students; there is no

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teacher present. He is standing directly in front of the music podium as if he is leading the group. The students keep trying to make it through a difficult part of the music, but are not quite getting it right. One of the students says that he wants to move on to the next page of music. Shane shakes his head and says, "Before I change the page, we have to play it perfectly." The students practice the piece a few more times, and although it sounds better, they still don't have it quite right. "That sounded awful," Shane tells the others. "We have to perfect it or I won't even play it. There is no point playing if it's not perfect." (p. 14)

According to the study, learning through the arts also has other pluses for T. E. Mathews students: increasing focus and weaving social connections between kids who might be warring with each other on the street. "I have noticed that students who feel they have become skilled at some aspect of any art project will share their accomplishments with other students. . . . Signs of positive peer pressure are also evident in the way they will encourage each other during music classes and performances" (p. 12).

It is Friday afternoon in the midst of the Flute Festival. Paul, an eighteen-year-old student who has only been at the school for a few weeks, is being encouraged to play. He only knows a few notes and is obviously quite distressed over the thought of playing in front of the other students. The principal, Ruth Mikkelsen, has walked over to Paul's desk and is pointing to the music stand at the front of the room. Paul tries to talk his way out of playing, but Ruth won't let him off that easily. Sensing that he can't get out of it, Paul walks warily to the front of the room and stands at the podium with Tana, a teacher's assistant, and plays a simple song, stumbling over a few of the notes. After the song is over, he quickly walks back towards his desk, his face pale and sweat running down his forehead. Students clap loudly, and Jason, a student who is often very vocal in his dislike of school, begins to shout, "You've come a long way Paul. Let's hear it for Paul. Way to go Paul." (p. 12)

The Stanford study evaluated students' emotional, social and academic growth. Researcher Babineaux visited T. E. Mathews twenty times during the year, observing classes, interviewing staff and students and attending staff meetings. He also utilized standardized test scores, written student work and attendance records.

The initial portion of his report deals with getting the students involved in school. "It is almost as if they arrive at school with a long checklist of reasons why they will feel justified in tuning out of class or deliberately failing," he wrote. "As the math teacher Craig put it, 'If these kids are given a clear opportunity to fail they will gladly take it. 'Recognizing this, the teachers understand that a large part of the battle is in finding ways to get them involved. One way they do this is by continually focusing on students' accomplishments and refusing to legitimize their negative views of themselves. (p. 16)" For the teachers, it is a great challenge to maintain high expectations knowing that giving students even the slightest

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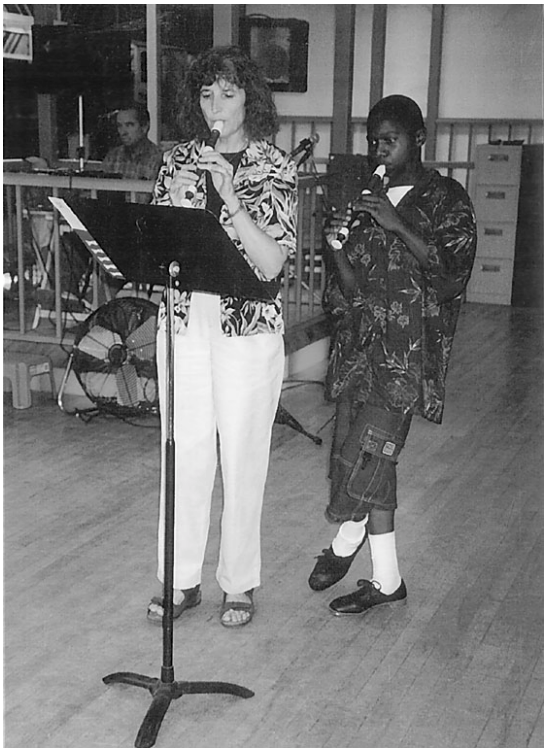

Principal Ruth Mikkelsen and student DeAngelo Downing play a recorder duet from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*

indication that they are not doing well is enough to make them quit trying.

In assessing the academic impact of the program, Babineaux reports that it is helping students with poor reading and math skills to make excellent academic progress. "Although a full statistical analysis was not performed because of shortcomings in the data, available figures suggest that the longer the student is enrolled at T. E. Mathews the greater the academic development: 62% of the students attending Mathews for at least 3/4 of the year advanced two or more grade levels in both math and reading, while only 18% of the students enrolled for 1/4 to 1/2 of the year showed the same improvement" (p. 33).

According to the study, a great impediment to the success of the program at every level is the high student turnover. Although a few students have attended for several years, and others for a year, many are enrolled for just a few months before they return to regular schools. Just when the students are making real progress, they leave. And at the same time, the school is continuously inundated with new students who bring negative attitudes and disruptive behavior.

Despite this major obstacle, Babineaux concludes that in addition to academic progress, there are substantial and important accomplishments, including: increased student participation in class activities, more time spent on task, greater focus on quality of work, increased willingness to try new things, and increased enthusiasm for engaging in original work.

Although many students are hostile, emotionally volatile and uncommunicative when they arrive, "there are also significant improvements in the way they relate to teachers and classmates, as well as how they respond to challenging or emotionally upsetting circumstances" (p.35). The researcher points to: more polite and considerate behavior, increased engagement in sports, games and conversation with other students, a greater ability to calm down and return to work after an upset, and an increased willingness to keep working under challenging conditions.

In addition to integration of the arts, the Yuba County experiment -- which also involves the

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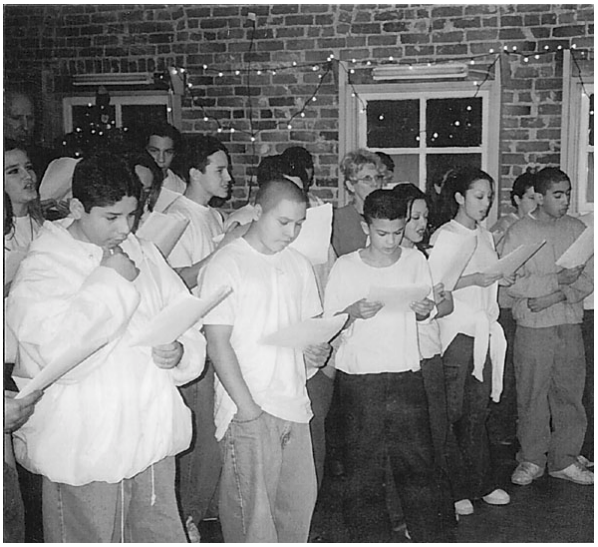
program at Carden Court School in Juvenile Hall -- utilizes other Waldorf approaches to augment and enliven state-mandated curricula. These include a one and a half hour integrated, thematic "main lesson" in which academic subjects are presented; multi-sensory teaching that addresses the full range of "intelligences" and learning styles; the extensive use of hands-on experiential learning; a focus on creating nurturing, caring classrooms that build resiliency in students; and a strong emphasis on oral language development with the presentation of many lessons -- including history and literature -- through storytelling, thus engaging students with minimal reading skills and opening doors to enhanced literacy.

When she first encountered Waldorf education at a Crocker Art Museum seminar, entitled Transforming Education through the Arts, principal Mikkelsen was impressed with how many of the Waldorf methods and child development principles that support them were now being confirmed by brain research into how children learn.

With nearly 700 independent schools world-wide -- in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, and 150 in the U.S, as well as in settings as diverse as New York's upper-east-side and the slums of Brazil -- Waldorf is being adapted to many different student populations. It is now also being translated for the public sector in America. There are two magnet schools, in Milwaukee and Sacramento, both serving urban populations, and a growing number of charters, especially in California. These Waldorf-methods public schools boast waiting lists, enthusiastic parents seeking an education that speaks to the whole child, increasingly



T. E. Mathews students perform songs for parents and guests at their end-of-year graduation and music festival

impressive test scores, and classrooms that resound with the joy of learning.

Teachers at the Yuba County Court and Community Schools are bringing innovative Waldorf practices to yet another student population: high-risk juvenile offenders who stand on the brink of a lifetime of crime, incarceration and hopelessness. These teachers first learned their Waldorf strategies at summer institutes for public school teachers given by Rudolf Steiner College, a partner in the experiment, located near Sacramento. Then specialized classes and on-site mentoring were made possible by grants from the Kellogg Foundation and The California Endowment.

It is clear that the program is gaining attention. It was featured in the September 1999 Atlantic Monthly article by Todd Oppenheimer entitled "Schooling the Imagination." Visitors to T. E. Mathews from other court and community

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schools find it hard to believe that these students who seem so actively engaged in the arts and learning are the same kind of problem kids they have in their own schools. Now, the Bay Area-based Walter S. Johnson Foundation is providing a planning grant for dissemination and replication.

And how do some of the T. E. Mathews students view a program that, eschewing the all-too-familiar work sheets, plunges them into the unknowns of painting, drawing, woodwork, music, drama, poetry and movement? "Three students told me it was the best school they ever attended," Ryan Babineaux reports. "Paul told me he liked T. E. Mathews because it was the first school he had attended where teachers had such high standards. 'They won't let you get away with anything.' And Kimberly, a 17 year old who has been in and out of schools for most of her life, put it this way: 'This is a pretty good school. It's the only one I'm willing to go to. In fact, it's the only one I've ever been willing to go to' " (p. 15).

References

Babineaux, R. (1999). Evaluation report: Thomas E. Mathews Community School. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, School of Education.

Oppenheimer, T. (1999, September). Schooling the Imagination. The Atlantic Monthly, 71-83.

About the Author:

Arline Monks coordinates Waldorf programs for public school teachers at Rudolf Steiner College, including an annual two-week summer institute, and a project to create a nationally-replicable model program for juvenile offenders at two Northern California schools. She has a B.A. in English Literature from the University of Michigan, was a reporter for the Los Angeles Times for several years, trained as a Waldorf teacher, and has written articles for educational journals.