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### Title

Nurturing the social-emotional and cognitive development of K-2 gifted learners through storytelling and drama

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### Author

Brouillette, Liane

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Nurturing the Social-Emotional and Cognitive Development of  
K-2 Gifted Learners through Storytelling and Drama<sup>1</sup>

A group of first graders sit in a circle, listening as their teacher reads the book *Thunder Cake*<sup>i</sup> (Polacco, 1997). They have been studying weather. The story tells of how a grandmother helps her granddaughter overcome a fear of thunderstorms. After the children have shared their own experiences with thunderstorms, the teacher takes the lesson a step further. Who can describe the sounds a thunderstorm makes? Bam! Boom! Children imitate the crack of thunder.

The teacher nods, then explains that thunder is only part of a storm. She gives each child a sheet of newsprint, explaining that they are going use it to recreate the many sounds of a thunderstorm. First, children are encouraged to take a few moments to experiment. How many sounds can they make with the paper? They go around the circle, giggling when someone comes up with an unexpected way of producing sound with paper. Next they will follow the teacher.

All sit quietly with the newsprint across their laps. The teacher begins tapping fingers on her paper, making a sound like rain. Children do the same. As the storm builds, the soundscape changes. The teacher leads the class, first in crumpling the newsprint, then moving it back and forth to create claps, bangs, and snaps of “thunder.” Gradually the rain slows. The hard taps on newsprint (now laid across laps) become less frequent. Papers are waved overhead to represent the ebbing sound of the wind. At last, with the newsprint again laid on their laps, children slide their hands smoothly across its surface to reflect the returning calm at the end of the storm.

What did they hear? As the class discusses the nuances of sound, the teacher connects the discussion to what they have already learned about how the weather changes from day to day.

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<sup>1</sup> Brouillette, L. (2010, summer). Nurturing the social-emotional and cognitive development of K-2 gifted learners through storytelling and drama. *Gifted Education Communicator*. California Association for the Gifted.

She encourages students to practice the skills of comparison/contrast by emphasizing binary opposites such as up/down, light/dark, loud/soft. Through this technique, the teacher helps struggling learners build vocabulary, while also challenging high achieving students with tasks that require complex cognitive skills. This strategy has many uses in the classroom.

The next day, discussion of binary opposites helps to deepen student understanding during the reading of *Owl Moon*<sup>ii</sup>, a picture book by Jane Yolen (1987). Pointing to a picture, the teacher asks: “Why are these people wearing warm clothing?” The question not only causes children to think more deeply about the context of the story, but it paves the way for such further questions as: “What is the opposite of ‘warm’?” “Why are they walking at night?” “What is the opposite of ‘night’?” Through such strategies, a read-aloud interlude with a picture book is made interesting and challenging to all children in the class, without making any child uncomfortable.

### Supporting the Social-Emotional Development of Gifted Learners

The persistence of the stereotype of gifted children experiencing social and emotional adjustment problems suggests that many high ability children do not thrive at school. Among the factors that have been identified as contributing to the underachievement of high ability students are: emotional issues; social and behavioral problems; the lack of an appropriate curriculum; learning and self-regulation difficulties. Unfortunately, the mandated curriculum and textbooks used in many states and school districts do little to address such issues.

During their pre-kindergarten years, children spend a large proportion of their waking hours engaged in expressive activities such as drawing, painting, molding clay, singing, and fantasy play. However, as soon as children arrive at school, they are expected to put such activities aside and sit quietly at desks. Kindergarten has come to resemble the first grade classrooms of decades past, with formal instruction replacing play and socialization. By default,

the task of nurturing of social-emotional development is left primarily to the family.

Researchers and educators have emphasized that healthy family relationships and parent-child interactions are critical to the development of gifted children. Yet, parents may feel unsure of how to interact productively with talented offspring who often seem precocious one minute and child-like the next. So, it can be helpful to take a look at how successful educators have learned to interact with bright, curious children who grasp many concepts quickly, yet remain more concrete in their thinking than the typical adult. The remaining sections look at 1) the findings of recent research on social-emotional development and 2) a set of on-line K-2 theater arts lessons, accompanied by streaming videos, which take an active approach to literacy<sup>iii</sup>.

#### How the Arts Support Social-Emotional Development

Activities such as dramatic play or dancing in unison provide a venue for learning collaboration and cooperation. To engage successfully in activities such as group singing, dancing, and dramatic play requires sharing, taking turns, and subordinating individual urges to the intentions of the group. In the course of carrying out cooperative tasks, children learn initiative and leadership, respect for others' ideas, and that they cannot always have their own way. Children begin to grasp how to get along with others and how to regulate themselves.

Young children who are more socially competent and emotionally perceptive have been found to be capable of more success in their relationships. Also, children who experience greater peer acceptance and more positive peer relationships tend to feel more positively about coming to school, to participate more in classroom activities, and to achieve more in the classroom. So, children who are competent in understanding the feelings of others tend to become more academically competent in the primary grades.

The arts naturally and frequently involve group tasks. Given the opportunity, young

children readily dance and recreate stories. By learning to recognize, label, manage, and talk about emotions, as well as to perceive and try to understand the emotions of others, children build skills that connect them with family, peers, and teachers. Young children who exhibit healthy social and behavioral adjustment are also more likely to do well academically in elementary school. Arts activities provide an arena for fostering these competencies.

### Enhancing Learning through the Arts

In recent years, the state and federal preoccupation with test scores has caused many schools to focus single-mindedly on cognitive development. Too often, the assumption has been that time spent on activities like painting, singing, and storytelling is somehow “wasted.” This narrowing of the curriculum deprives students of the aesthetic and social-emotional stimulation that they might, otherwise, have experienced. Ironically, research has shown that well-designed arts integration can deepen student learning by making all lessons more memorable, both through involving the senses and by helping students see connections to their own lives.

What would this look in the classroom? This section provides an overview of a kindergarten theatre arts unit<sup>iv</sup> developed by the San Diego Unified School District in partnership with the University of California, Irvine<sup>v</sup>. The California English Language Arts (ELA) and Visual and Performing (VAPA) Content Standards are both addressed. So, teachers who are looking for ways to adequately address the ELA oral language standards can consult the theater lessons for detailed guidance on how to elicit high levels of pro-social verbal interaction.

The first lesson focuses on teaching children how to introduce themselves with confidence. Lesson two introduces the story “We’re Going on a Bear Hunt.” As the teacher tells the story, the children repeat his words, using appropriate variations in pitch and volume; children also mimic gestures and sound effects. Afterward, the class looks at pictures of real and

imaginary bears, discussing how to tell which bears are real, which imaginary. The third lesson is built around the same story, but focuses on using voice and body to bring the story to life.

In the fourth lesson, the kindergartners listen to and perform the story *Goldie Locks and the Three Bears*. The class identifies the four *characters*, the *setting*, and *sequence of events*. In groups, the children create improvisations and pantomimes, paying attention to characterization and story points. Then, the teacher pulls the class together and discusses the actor's role in creating characters. The fifth lesson focuses on two poems: "Cat" and "Two Little Kittens."

While reading the first poem slowly, the teacher discusses and models the movements that a cat would make. After reading the second poem, children identify and discuss the similarities and differences between the movements of a real cat and of the imaginary kittens. Volunteers act out each of the poems, while the rest of the class is encouraged to model good audience behavior.

Lesson six asks students to make shapes using a lump of clay or sheet of aluminum foil. Children talk about the shapes, then try to make the same shapes with their bodies. Afterward, students volunteer to create a shape and ask peers what character this shape could represent. The class discusses how angles and sharp lines sometimes indicate strength or power, while curvy lines indicate softness and flow. In lesson seven, children observe their hands and all the ways hands can move. The teacher demonstrates hand movements; children mimic these. Then pairs of children sit facing one another; each practices mirroring exactly the hand motions of the other. This takes strong focus and concentration, as well as the ability both to lead and to follow.

The focus of lesson eight is on props. Children talk about when they last dressed up as someone else (perhaps for Halloween), whether they moved or spoke differently, if they used a prop. Then the teacher uses a couple of props to demonstrate movements that could define a character. Children mimic the movements and discuss: Who was that character? What clues

helped them to guess? Finally each child chooses a prop and creates a character, through movement, for the others to guess. In lesson nine, children choose role-playing scenarios. They create *tableau* (frozen pictures of their chosen scene). The lesson enables students to see how performing on stage works: the curtain is closed, actors enter, the curtain opens, actors perform. At the end the actors freeze, the audience applauds, the curtain closes and actors exit. One group at a time walks through this sequence, while the rest of the class practices being a good audience.

### Integrating Social-Emotional and Cognitive Development

During the early years of school, well-designed arts activities—especially creative drama—can provide a rich resource for educators and parents in search of effective ways to support the social-emotional and cognitive development of highly energetic and curious students. Gifted children can feel boxed in by adult assumptions that they will always come up with the “right answer”. The arts relieve talented children from performance anxiety and encourage creativity by allowing time for playful experimentation.

By modeling creativity and providing spaces for controlled “craziness”, adults can help to nurture a sense of adventure and exploration. In most arts activities there is no “wrong” answer, just the opportunity to investigate new and more satisfying ways to represent each artist’s insights. A focus on the “artist’s choice” provides a satisfying way of fostering problem-solving skills. The emphasis on choice is highly empowering for children who may feel bored by the predictability of schoolwork. Arts activities also allow children to borrow freely from one another, building on one another’s ideas. Just as teachers routinely borrow good ideas from one another, children learn how drawing on the resources of the group can make everyone stronger.

### On-line Resources

Theatre Lessons for Kindergarten through Grade 2: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/theatre-grades>

Puppetry Lessons for Kindergarten through Grade 2: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/puppetry-grades>

Dance Lessons for Kindergarten through Grade 2: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/dance-grades>

Music, Geography and History Lessons, Grades 5-8: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/geo/hist>

Journal for Learning through the Arts: [http://escholarship.org/uc/clta\\_lta](http://escholarship.org/uc/clta_lta)

UC Irvine Center for Learning through the Arts and Technology Blog: <http://blogs.uci.edu/clat/>

### Bibliography

Polacco, P. (1997). *Thunder Cake*. New York: Putnam Juvenile.

Yolen, J. (1987). *Owl Moon*. New York: Philomel.



- <sup>i</sup> Author's webpage: [http://www.patriciapolacco.com/books/thundercake/thundercake\\_index.html](http://www.patriciapolacco.com/books/thundercake/thundercake_index.html)
- <sup>ii</sup> Video available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2AND9w2M6k>
- <sup>iii</sup> The lessons were developed by the San Diego Unified School District in partnership with the University of California, Irvine, and are available at: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/theatre-grades>
- <sup>iv</sup> This unit is available on-line at: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/clat/theatre-k>
- <sup>v</sup> A description of San Diego/UC Irvine Teaching Artist Project is available at: [http://uci.edu/features/2010/03/feature\\_artseducation\\_100301.php](http://uci.edu/features/2010/03/feature_artseducation_100301.php)