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**Samuel Can't Read:
A Call for the Arts in Education**
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I felt lightheaded and my palms were damp when I faced my fifth-grade class for the first time in the fall of 1998. As I carefully scanned the twenty-six young faces before me, I saw in their eyes boredom, anger, apathy, and fear. Of the 26 students, half qualified for Title One assistance in math, or reading, or both. Five students were diagnosed with ADHD, and four were on independent educational programs (IEP). I had my work cut out for me. Although all these students have their own story, it is the story of Samuel I wish to share.

Samuel easily stood out from the rest of his classmates. His appearance was rumped and dirty, and his most striking feature was his heavily lidded eyes. I knew, from reading through the sheaf of papers given me before school started, that Sam was an IEP student. A victim of fetal alcohol syndrome, he currently lived with his father and two brothers. Sam's performance in math was fairly close to grade level, but he read on a lower- first-grade level. This affected his abilities across the curriculum. For the past four years his achievement had been low, and it appeared he felt no compulsion to change the situation. Sam was withdrawn and unresponsive during classroom activities. He found no personal value in what was being taught and continually asked if he could "go home now." When Sam was recognized or singled out in class, he would always drop his head and thoughtfully rub a shaking hand back and forth across his forehead. I tried many of the traditional methods for teaching Sam, but I was largely unsuccessful until I introduced the notion of doing a reader's theatre production on the Civil War. Immediately, the class embraced the idea with a great deal of enthusiasm—except for Sam. I found an

opportunity to speak privately with Sam, and we agreed that he would participate if an aide and I agreed to help him practice the part in advance so that he could read it fluently during the performance.

The class worked hard to prepare the four scenes, each representing a year of the war. They were patient and supportive of each other, and they added personal touches to their characters without prompting on my part. Sam became caught up in the experience and quickly moved along in the energetic, creative atmosphere the project generated in the classroom. The day finally came when the neighboring fifth-grade class came in to watch our performance—which, thankfully, progressed without flaw. Toward the end of the program I surreptitiously passed the other teacher a note asking if she could identify my "low readers." Her reply was to underline the words and place several large question marks after. I was elated—and so was Sam. Encouraged by his success, Sam started taking risks that helped him move forward. He began to participate in class discussions and activities. He demonstrated a growing intellectual capacity and a willingness to accept some portion of responsibility for his education. He began to care. During Read Across America week, Sam actually read a Dr. Suess book to the entire class. I had found the key to Sam's potential, and it was drama.

Since early in this century, advocates have been extolling the advantages of using drama in the elementary classroom; however, few schools consistently use this important instructional tool. Since the pioneering work of Winifred Ward in the 1930s, the concept of drama as a teaching method has steadily gained acceptance. Unlike

learning experiences with specific right or wrong answers, drama allows for multiple outcomes. Sam failed the standardized test designed to measure his retention of the important facts and dates associated with the Civil War; but his successful participation in the reader's theatre increased his self-confidence and helped to provide the impetus for further growth in other areas as well. Drama is a way to give form to otherwise unavailable kinds of knowledge and experience because the whole field of human experience comes within its scope.

In the classroom, there is an increasing evidence to indicate a higher degree of motivation in children who are guided to explore, develop, and express their ideas with others. The classroom teacher can use . . . drama . . . to help children learn to cooperate, confront problems, make decisions, gain confidence, and evaluate the outcomes of their actions. Further, creative drama may be used by the teachers as an aid in the presentation of curricular material.

Drama, as with the other arts, can help children learn by giving them the first step: the desire to learn.

Our national standard is to educate every child; we do not discriminate against race, religion, or mental or physical ability. This is not always the case in other countries. There are, of course, various reasons for inequality in other educational systems, but the fact remains that only those physically and mentally capable of "making the grade" are given the benefit of an education. Our standard for equity in education creates a unique set of circumstances in our classrooms.

Because we undertake the responsibility of educating every child, we as teachers face a wide range of abilities in our classrooms each day, as illustrated above. Historically, those who could not function within a certain norm of their grade level were segregated and placed in "special education" classes. This is no longer the case. The recent trend has been to "mainstream" these children back into the regular classroom. This

policy answers the need for these children to interact with their peers and receive a more enriched curricular experience. Their presence also helps to teach the entire class tolerance and the skills necessary to work with individuals perceived as different. Their attendance in the classroom, however, also creates unique challenges.

Without question, these children place additional demands on our skills and resources as teachers. Each child is unique. Children all have the right to learn, but not all children learn the same things, the same way, or at the same time. The challenge lies in helping this diverse group of individuals cooperate and learn together. An even greater challenge lies in developing the full potential of each individual child.

We have been handed a monumental task. We must meet the needs of each Sam in our classroom while continuing to provide intellectual and socially enriching experiences for every other student as well. If we add to this the American public's anxiety over students' tested performance in the areas of math, reading, social studies, and science, then the cry for educational reform becomes more strident from both inside and outside the classroom. In this rapidly changing age of technology and information, where knowledge, understanding, and application are vital to an individual's success, we can no longer rely solely on antiquated methods of instruction. We must meet the need to educate in a complex setting for a much more complex world. It is vital that we have access to as many tools as possible to succeed at this seemingly impossible task. The arts can act as the additional tools necessary to help meet this challenge.

The early 1960s witnessed a huge increase of the arts and drama in schools. Initial training courses and specialist departments began to thrive in the popular climate of "progressive" and "liberal" education. However, the educational climate changed, and in the early 1970s the political agenda was to cut costs and make schools accountable for student performance. In the ensuing years, drama and the arts were eschewed as "frill" subjects, and rigorous

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vocational training was emphasized. Hence, many teachers educated during this period who are currently instructing in our schools were not trained to use the arts in their classrooms.

As the educational paradigm shifts once again, educators are recognizing the importance of the arts in education. The Council for Basic Education supports the belief that the arts, along with math, reading, writing, science, literature, history, geography, government, and foreign language, are basic because they generate all other learning. Ernest L. Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has stated: "During the past quarter century, literally thousands of school-based programs have demonstrated beyond question that the arts can not only bring coherence to our fragmented academic work, but through the arts, students' performance in other academic disciplines can be enhanced." Furthermore, a report issued in October 1999—"Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning"—offers clear evidence of how the arts can improve academic performance, energize teachers, and transform learning environments. The report was developed by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation with the support of the GE Fund, the Arts Education Partnership, and the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. The report found that students with high levels of arts participation outperform "arts-poor" students on virtually every measure. It also found that learning through the arts has significant effects on learning in other domains and enables educators to reach students in effective ways.

In this new age of "arts enlightenment," advocates have been given an opportunity to reestablish the arts as a vital ingredient in our educational curriculum. Our question then becomes, With so much at stake and so much to gain, how can we effectively implement the arts in our classroom instruction? For the past decade, research has been conducted and reports published at the national level that extoll the positive impact of arts in education. Why, then, do

we not embrace the arts as an integral part of our educational curriculum?

Ramon Cortines, executive director of the Pew Network for Standard-Based Reform at Stanford University, offers an answer to this puzzling question: "There are legions of people who do not see the arts as either intrinsically valuable or even useful in acquiring 'real-world' skills or achieving success in the 'other basics.' Therefore, making the case for the arts to important constituencies involved in school reform—parents, business, civic leaders, and other educators, is crucial." In other words, we who are converted must cease our preaching to the choir and begin a grassroots movement to propel the arts into the center of our educational curriculum. Why should we care about the arts? Decades of research have shown that an arts education contributes significantly to improved critical thinking, problem posing, problem solving, and decision making. As with language and mathematics, the crux of an arts education involves the communication, manipulation, interpretation, and understanding of complex symbols. Developing fluency in artistic expression and understanding fosters higher-order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The arts are multimodal, addressing the multiple intelligences of students. The arts develop a person's imagination and judgment, character and values, confidence and empathy, respect and tolerance.

The research confirms what we have known intuitively: The arts teach all of us innovation, novelty, and creativity. We learn to be wondrous. We know, of course, that arts education is not the magic pill that will simultaneously reform schools and boost student achievement. However, now more than ever before, our children need a broad-based general education that equips them not only intellectually but also emotionally and socially to meet the increasing perplexities and demands of life. The arts have an inestimable role to play, not as an appendage but rather as the center of the curriculum.

Arts instruction can be found in schools throughout the United States, but these programs

often reach only segments of the student population. What can concerned leaders, educators, and essential support staff such as librarians do to support arts education in our own schools and encourage its implementation at a district-wide level? Cortines shares five possible steps for consideration: (1.) join the board of the local arts council; (2.) consider arts background and cultural interests when hiring your next educator, whether you are looking for a music teacher, a math teacher, or a principal; (3.) reach out to the local university or college to establish or strengthen a partnership that will enhance your arts education; (4.) invite local arts groups to give performances or demonstrations at your schools; (5.) call a community forum on the arts to discuss recent research on the arts and learning. While there is no sure-fire formula for success, the many ways we can incorporate the arts into schooling makes it easy for every educator to promote the arts and, in so doing, promote high-quality education throughout our school systems.

In conclusion, let us once again return to Sam. Children who are "checked-out" and considered classroom failures are often so labeled because traditional classroom practices do not engage them. Success in and through the arts can become a bridge to learning and eventual success in other curricular areas as well. Sam taught me that the arts need to become curriculum partners with other subjects in ways that will allow them to enhance the learning process as a whole. We must make the arts a basic part of any program of education. They are crucial to any program of reform.