

Drama in the Turnip Patch



Standard

ELACC4RL1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

ELACC4RL2: Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

ELACC4RI1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

ELACC4RI2: Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

ELACC4SL4: Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience in an organized manner, using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.

ELACC4SL5: Add audio recordings and visual displays to presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes

ELACC4SL6: Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion); use formal English when appropriate to task and situation.

Overview

“They yanked and they jerked and they tugged,” yelled Lauren Spain-Bondi’s elementary-aged farmers, who sat with rapt attention in the Kingsley Elementary school garden in Evanston, Illinois. They were active participants in a dramatic performance inspired by the book *Grandma Lena’s Big Ol’ Turnip*, a contemporary variation on a Ukrainian folktale.

“It started when we wanted to integrate different disciplines into the new school garden,” says Lauren. Science was a no brainer, but some teachers raised their eyes at the prospect of linking drama and gardening. So Lauren, who was a school parent and farmer-in-residence, and the school’s Garden Team chair, Sharon Smaller, hatched an idea. They asked friend and drama specialist Mel Ludington to develop an interactive performance of the turnip story for the school’s harvest festival. And she did, complete with costumes and loads of audience participation. As Mel told the story with great gusto, she invited some students to take on the roles of the turnip, Grandma Lena, and so on. The larger audience chanted along. Once the young actors had pulled the giant four-child turnip they’d created, they had a chance to yank out and taste some of the real turnips they’d raised from seed to root.

Tilling New Ground

Intrigued by the children’s exuberance and learning opportunities they saw, Lauren and Mel are now collaborating to develop a series of garden-related storytelling, drama, and gardening activities called *Everyone Can Garden!* The concept: Involve children in exploring concepts related to growing future gardeners and to plant life cycles. One thread is to investigate how and why people choose to garden and to learn that gardeners are a diverse bunch. To that end, the women are gathering relevant kids’ fiction and nonfiction books, such as *The Summer My Father Was Ten*, to inspire student performances.

Advice for Getting Started

When teachers ask Mel about how to use drama in a schoolyard or garden to teach concepts, she says, “Start simply.” She explains that the life cycle of a plant begs to be acted out. Invite students to become a seed that grows and gets picked. Use simple green costumes. Another strategy involves inviting students to look at a garden-related book and then introducing the concept of *tableaux* (see sidebar). Ask, “Can we become a *tableaux* of the garden?” “The important part is kinesthetic: getting it into kids’ bodies,” says Mel. “Having students ‘become’ an illustration gets them thinking about the concept or environment in a different way. Using their bodies also enables kids to express images, observations, and concepts in ways that make sense to them. Here are some other springboards that Mel suggests. Have students . . .

- use story starters for creating a scene or monologue.
- imitate a plant shape with their bodies.
- compare an illustration an author created with an illustration done with bodies.
- listen to stories or describe pictures in their minds, then act them out.

- imagine and describe a garden that's ready to pick and one that's been mistreated. Use those images as fertile jumping off points.
- learn about earthworms and the ways they help soil. Create a worm made of students in which each child is a segment. The worm winds between the desks to aerate the classroom.
- form their bodies into tight earth balls. They should react when you describe different ways the soil might be "loosened up" (for instance, by a human plow, worms, or stream of water).

How They Grow

"Much of school involves sitting at a desk and writing and listening," says Mel. "Even elementary school is so theoretical and separate from 'doing.' Kids' lives are physically active. With drama, kids are doing and creating. As with gardening, you create something that wasn't there before. It makes kids feel important to be needed as part of that process."

It is that engagement, rather than a final performance, that is most compelling to Mel. She prefers to think of a public presentation as an "informance," which focuses more on students' process than on the end result. She wants to see youngsters experience being, becoming, inquiring, and taking on the mantle of the expert. "What's exciting about drama is that it offers a way in at the beginning and a way to explore and take on a role you might otherwise not have access to." She explains that assessment is public in that type of work so as students share performances, they learn from one another or from explaining it to someone else. "Because it's so collaborative, kids help bring one another along."

<http://www.kidsgardening.org/classroomstory/drama-turnip-patch>