Welcome to the Spring 2004 issue of the Folklore and Education Section newsletter.

You may navigate through this issue by clicking on the section headings to the left.

News about last year's section meeting and Saturday workshop at the American Folklore Society conference can be found in the "AFS News" section, along with tentative information about this year's Saturday workshop.

Our "Field Notes" section takes on a slightly different format in this issue, featuring Paddy Bowman's column about the National Network for Folk Arts in Education, as well as articles on several "best practices": two of the presenters from last year's Saturday AFS workshop, Carol Spellman of the Oregon Historical Society and Nancy Widdicombe of the Montana Heritage Project, report on their projects, and Heidi Huckabee, a New Mexico middle-school language arts teacher, describes her year-long project on a community cemetery in Roswell. Finally, Ruth Olson and Anne Pryor report on their collaborative project, Wisconsin's "Hmong Cultural Tour."

Thanks to the many folks who contributed materials for this year's newsletter. We invite your participation, as well--feel free to direct any comments, suggestions, and materials for future issues either to the editor, Rosemary Hathaway, or the co-editor, Gregory Hansen.

The section's senior convener, Jan Rosenberg, kicks off this issue with a look at the history of folklore and education.

Reflections on Folklife and Education: Is There a Unified History of Folklore & Education?

There is a history and philosophy of folklore and education. Here's one interpretation.

From a folkloristic perspective, the organized history of folklore and education begins in 1976 with the establishment of Folk Artists in the Schools programs funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. But the philosophy of folklore and education has its roots in the 1870s with the birth of the Progressive Education movement and the belief that "culture could be democratized without being vulgarized, the faith that everyone could share not only in the benefits of the new sciences, but in the pursuit of the arts as well." (Cremin: 1961:viii-ix)

Based on this belief, progressive education broadened "the program and function of the school to include direct concern for health, vocation, and the quality of family and community life." It "applied in the classroom the pedagogical principles derived from
new scientific research in psychology and the social sciences.” And progressive education tailored “instruction more and more to the different kinds and classes of children who were being brought within the purview of the school.” (Cremin: ibid)

Folk arts in education/folk artists in the schools was progressively guided. At first, sharing community-based traditions with school children was a new idea grounded in a distinct progressive philosophy. It was a successful program with folk arts in education/folk artists in the schools programs taking place across the country. The reason for the ease of this is that folk arts in education/folk artists in the school programs became formulaic. Outlined initially by Linda Constant Buki, folk arts in education/folk artists in the school programs could be conducted according to a labor intensive formula in which a folk arts coordinator would conduct fieldwork in a region and determine, with the help of an advisory committee, which folk artists would be most suitable for a school workshop or presentation. A certain amount of attention was focused on the school and its curricular needs, but the overarching goal was to “bring those engaged in creative activity together with those learning about the range of life’s possibilities.” (Abrahams:1987:77)

Folk arts in education/folk artists in the schools enjoyed free rein in public schools in the name of being progressive. Programs were well received, but there was, and still is, an underlying concern whether or not folk arts in education is of any use when students are tested for competence according to state mandated standards. Folk arts in education/folk artists in the school is often considered a “pull out” or “add on” to the school day.

There are teachers who continue to embrace progressive education’s ideas. Many of them feel harnessed to state standards and testing. But there are programs that practice progressive principles. Think about Foxfire, the Montana Heritage Project, and the Michigan Folkpatterns program.

There are progressive models. In 1917, Lucy Sprague Mitchell of Bank Street (then called the Bureau for Educational Experiments) led student fieldtrips through New York City to explore its cultural and physical geography. In 1924, Rachel Davis Dubois and her students explored social studies by discovering the contributions of New Jersey ethnic groups to regional heritage. In 1930 Dorothy Howard discovered the power of school children’s games in the exploration of the shape of the English language. Teachers engaged in discovery also met mandated standards. Their teaching wasn’t an “add on” or “pull out.”

What can progressive educators teach us in this day of standards and teaching to the test? They can teach us to always ask, “who is this program for?” Is a folk arts in education program for folk artists, the teachers, the school district, or the students? If answered in the progressive, the answer should be “all of the above.” Folk arts in education celebrate the tradition bearer, cooperates with the teacher, recognizes the school district, and empowers them all, including the student.
Progressive educators teach us to value student interest. Programs like Foxfire, Folkpatterns, or the Montana Heritage Project embrace student interest in aspects of community heritage. They allow students to take the lead in exploration and discovery. Projects such as Louisiana Voices encourage students to take an active role in learning about their heritage.

A progressive stance encourages us to look at the role of the community in the work we do. Not only in terms of the tradition bearers we work with, but with the community as a whole. We ask how a community is affected and effected by our work with students. What can the community give to us in our work? What can we give the community?

A progressive philosophy of folk arts in education aims for the democratization of the school experience as it relates to community development. It means taking into account not only the needs of tradition bearers, but the needs of the school, from standards to student involvement, to the community as a whole. As folklorists in education we immerse ourselves in both folklore and education. We would benefit from an awareness of the culture and history of education as we are desirous of people to be aware of the cultures we explore and celebrate.

--Jan Rosenberg, 2003-2004 Senior Convener

References


