

Common Core Standards, the Play and Magic by Wendy Davenport Curriculum Director

There can't be many people who haven't heard about the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for schools. At first sight the standards can seem rather prescriptive, and even restricting. However at The Village School in Royalston, we have found that the CCSS can be applied in surprisingly creative ways.

Every year, the combined 4th-6th grade class – numbering twenty students this year – spends nearly two months writing and performing a play. This is based on the class's year-long study of a particular theme, which this year has been The Middle Ages. Everyone ends up with a speaking part, and everyone contributes to the writing. The class develops characters and plot, and every child writes his or her version of each scene, either in the classroom or for homework. The class teachers, George Bennett and Myra Chapman, then take lines from the children's various versions to form a composite script to which everyone has contributed.

There's something magical about the 4th-6th play, and the way it comes together in a relatively short period of time, especially since there are many times in the process when it feels like an impossible feat. This is particularly true at the start, when no one has - literally - any idea of what the play will be about, or how it will develop. Ironically, even though our experience of the play is magical, it is really the result of an enormous amount of work on the part of the teachers, the students, and the community. And yet there is also an element of magic when the stage lights up, and no one cares how much labor it needed to reach that moment.

Most people recognize that the play is a wonderful way for the students to apply the historical and cultural knowledge they learned through the yearly theme, but it is so much more than that. Recently in Language Arts staff meetings, we have been looking at the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and, in particular, at the standards for reading literature. The CCSS push the development of high-level literary analysis skills, starting at an early age. Its vision is of teaching 'analytical, engaged reading' (*Pathways to the Common Core*, p.53). As a staff, we are in the process of looking at the standards carefully, and interpreting them to fit our philosophy. Although we believe in teaching critical thinking, we also are aware of the need to make learning fun and real; there needs to be time and space for joy.

Listening to George and Myra's class brainstorming ideas for the play, I am struck over and over again by the way the children refer to important literary and writing concepts as they brainstorm the plot of the play. Here are just a few examples:

'Word choice as it relates to character development': during a discussion of the characters a child calls out, "The king should be pompous, really pompous!" Everyone agrees and starts imagining all the funny things a king could do on stage to show that he is pompous. What a perfect word to describe this character they are creating! Even the children who didn't know what that word means, know it now, and their understanding will increase as they write lines for the character throughout the play.

'Character development': While developing a new character, someone suddenly asks: "Wait, wait! What's his backstory?" instinctively knowing that the character's backstory, or motivation, will influence how he or she walks, talks and acts throughout the play.

'Stylistic writing choices': After reading the first scene aloud, the class realizes that the phrase, 'find out' was repeated too often, ruining the flow of the dialogue. A brief discussion ensues, and some 'find outs' are replaced.

‘Recognizing that literature has themes that run through a story (and often more than one theme)’: One of the children says that “I like the idea of having more than one overlapping problem,” and several others agree. One of them reminds us that in most stories, problems pile up before they are finally resolved.

Then someone refers to the character Dogberry, from Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*. The children saw this play, performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company under its alternative title of *Love’s Labours Won*, when they visited Stratford-upon-Avon during the U.K. trip in February. Dogberry mangles words in his attempts to use grandiloquent language, and he was one of the children’s favorite characters. The class seizes on the idea; of course our play should have someone similar. In no time one of the children suggests the name Catfruit, to mimic the character of Dogberry, and the name catches on.

The children’s growing confidence in the play-writing process is underlined when George warns that writing malapropisms for Catfruit is going to be difficult. “It’s harder to write good nonsense than ordinary lines,” he says. Without hesitation, the class choruses, “We can do it!” And as they write scene two, in which Catfruit makes his first appearance, several of the children prove that they can.

Watching the play writing process unfold, I can hear each standard being applied in the discussion. Not only are these students referencing the tremendous amount of learning they have already done this year, and in years past, but they are also actively and passionately developing and consolidating their writing and literary analysis skills by the minute. I could list the specific Common Core standards they are achieving here, one by one, and draw more parallels to them, but at this minute I just want to soak up the moment. The whole class is ‘all in’; they are working with fierce concentration and joy. They are working really hard and the play is unfolding- magically.