

These Pirates Help Children Learn to Write



James Matthew Daniel/Story Pirates
A Story Pirates performance in New York City in February

This is the VOA Special English Education Report.

A group called Story Pirates goes into schools and performs shows for children. But these shows are based on stories written by the children themselves. The grown-ups are there to help them become better writers.

The Story Pirates are active in more than two hundred schools across the United States. Their method is designed to help children learn about the purpose and structure of writing.

Actors and teachers known as teacher-artists help students write stories. The children feel the pride of ownership in their work and may get to see their story performed.

About two hundred actors and teachers are members of the Story Pirates. It was founded in two thousand three. The group is based in Los Angeles and also has performers on the East Coast.

The basic program is called the Idea Storm. It involves two visits to a school.

On the first visit, the teachers and actors hold a writing workshop at a student assembly. They help students express their ideas. Benjamin Salka, the group's chief executive officer, says they work with children to "open up" their imaginations. But that is only part of the process.

BENJAMIN SALKA: "We work with them on the actual craft and structure of writing. In other words, Story Pirates is not just a creativity and self-esteem-building program. It is a writing program. And we focus on elements of structure and style as broad as conflict and creative conflict resolution, and as minute as grammar."

He says they work with students to rewrite and shape their story to improve it. The goal is a final product that can express the ideas that were in the writer's head. All the children get comments and suggestions on their work.

After about a month, the Story Pirates return to the school. This time, they perform the stories that they have chosen and prepared for the stage. They sing, dance, tell jokes, use puppets -- whatever they can do to make the experience fun.

A more extensive program can be found at the Bronx Charter School for the Arts in New York City. Ann Ledo is arts director for the school, where most of the students are black or Latino and many come from poor families. Ms. Ledo says the work of the actors is an important part of the children's education.

ANN LEDO: "As a school that has a focus on the arts, we bring the Story Pirates in to further our students' experience and understanding of academic content."

Some educators may think of the importance currently placed on testing in schools, and wonder how they can measure the effects of a program like this. But Ann Ledo praises the results.

ANN LEDO: "It really is a magical moment when the kids see their stories come to life."

And that's the VOA Special English Education Report, written by Jerilyn Watson. I'm Christopher Cruise.