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Curtain Up: Place-based Teaching & Learning in the New York City Theater District

By Peggy McNamara & Bryan Andes

On a crisp fall day in early October, first graders from the Mosaic School examine their local school neighborhood in midtown Manhattan. Research notebooks in hand, they look at the places around them. Tourists and workers stare, wondering: Where did these students come from? What are they doing? Why are they not in their classroom?

Surrounded by theaters, restaurants, office buildings, hotels, apartment buildings, and brownstones, first graders are taught that the whole world can become their classroom. As they approach each building on these busy commercial streets, they decide: What kind of place is this and what is it used for? When they return to their classroom, their teacher guides them to examine the kinds of places they have encountered and begin to explore the importance of these places to their community.

What does it take for teachers to use a place-based approach to teaching and learning?

At the Mosaic School place-based education begins with the process of using their local community surroundings as sites for students to explore and expand their understanding of the world. For the past 15 years we — a K/1 teacher and a professional developer—have worked together as collaborative curriculum makers, constructing and reconstructing curriculum to match students’ interests and learning needs. When teachers act as curriculum makers, curriculum emerges from an analysis of learning experiences that is steered by students’ questions and enriched by the significant role the school and neighborhood community play in creating learning opportunities. Such an approach supports students as creators of knowledge.

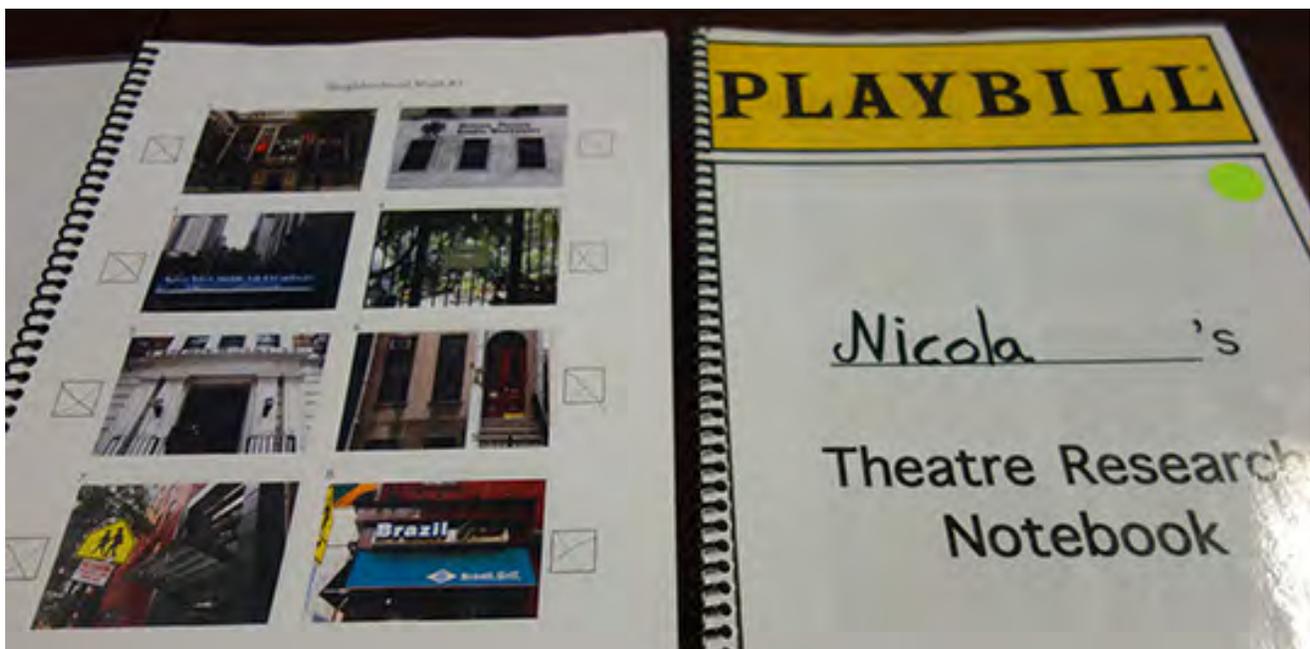
The Mosaic School, a prekindergarten through fifth grade public school, reflects the diversity that is New York City in an atmosphere that respects individuality and values families and community members as important educational resources. Social studies has served as an organizer for the ways in which the teachers at the Mosaic School integrate the content and skills of many subject areas. Social studies is a naturally integrative subject because it invites children to delve into their own lives and the lives of others (Linguist, 2002), and its content provides the “what” of learning—the “what to research,” the “what to think” about, and the “what to do something about.”

Critical to studying content is helping students learn how they can gather information about their world through in-depth studies of “places.” Carefully planned trips like the one described in the

opening vignette educate students to observe their environment, gather data, and form hypotheses. A natural curiosity is fostered when students and teachers situate their learning in lived experiences. Place-based learning enables students and their teachers to know and care for a place in which they spend significant time each day. When considering a place-based curriculum, Sobel (2004) invites schools “to uncover and cultivate the unique genius of the local environment and community through the school’s curriculum” (p. 22).

In this article we describe and analyze the process first grade teachers used as they guided their students to investigate a place in their school community called “the Theater District,” an important industry in the neighborhood. Teachers, students, and their families pass by these theaters every day, unaware of the dedicated collaboration that is needed to put on a theatrical production. Through an in-depth study of theaters, students learned about the roles, responsibilities, and interdependence of people who work in and attend theaters. The theater study culminated with first graders taking on the roles and responsibilities of both on-stage and off-stage theater workers, and putting on a complete production where their work was highlighted. The result was not simply the performance of a musical, but first graders’ presentation of their understanding of the process carried out by professionals in the theater world.

As the opening recounts, the theater study began with a trip to investigate the different places in the school neighborhood and their potential purposes. During the initial trips students began to identify clusters: sixteen theaters, twelve restaurants, two supermarkets, two grocery stores, one fire station, one bike store, five brownstones, and one very tall apartment building. These findings were recorded in their notebooks.



Theater research Notebook.

As teachers facilitated the tallying process, some students hypothesized that visitors to the neighborhood might come to see a play or musical. They began to wonder if there were lots

of restaurants in close proximity so that people could eat before or after they went to a show. Other students noticed that there were not many places—except for a small park and the school playground—for students to play. By fostering students’ skills and strategies of observation, the teachers introduced them to the values and opportunities in the places where they live and go to school. As students and teachers recognized the resources in the environment around them the walls between the school and the community became permeable (Wilson, 1997). These neighborhood explorations provided students with a context in which to view the role of a theater.

Based on the teachers’ own understanding of the theater and early childhood curriculum, they planned for students to learn about the features and internal workings of a theater, as well as its role in the local community. Teachers conducted their own research, asked themselves questions, and investigated the multiple ways of acquiring and demonstrating knowledge. Teachers accomplished these tasks by conducting many pre-trips, without students, to consider the best possible ways of utilizing a particular space. They created a learning environment within which the students were encouraged to “walk in every theater worker’s shoes,” examining what each job looked like, sounded like, and felt like.

Students were learning to understand the different workers’ perspectives as well as their relationship to one another. As they did so, the theater study evolved into three stages: the research phase, the recreation phase, and the implementation phase. The first phase began with the students learning how to observe, interview, and document a variety of theater jobs in order to understand all the processes and procedures needed to run a theater and to produce a theatrical show. In the second phase, students had an opportunity to use their newly acquired knowledge as they took on a specific job. They used role-playing and guided practice to develop their individual job skills. In the third and final phase, students ran a theater and produced a musical, stripping away the walls of the theater in order to show the audience members the interactions that occur before, during, and after a performance, making everything that occurred within a theatrical production transparent.

Researching the Theater District

Teachers decided that the best way for students to begin their theater research was to attend a Broadway musical. Students then generated lists of specific places in the theater (e.g., stage, auditorium, lobby, box office) and jobs (e.g., actors, musicians, box office workers) that they observed. Starting with exploratory questions from teachers, students began to ponder additional places and jobs: Who came up with the story? How did the actors know how to dance? Where were the costumes kept? How did the actors get changed so quickly? How did everything get in the right place at the right time? Attending the show at the beginning of the study served as a shared experience that provided a foundation on which to build their knowledge of the places and jobs in a theater. Teachers used the show as a reference point throughout the study.

Teachers were committed to engaging the whole community in the education of the first graders. They reached out to the local school community and the neighboring theater district to make connections. The process of engaging the school’s parents and the theater community began

slowly, with teachers' carefully worded emails and follow-up phone calls about the importance of their participation in this curriculum. Parents were valuable resources. Several parents who held jobs in the theater field joined class interviews, connected teachers to their colleagues, and helped to plan trips to various theaters in the neighborhood.

Members of the theater community were excited about the opportunity to engage with a school in order to educate future audiences and pass on the knowledge of their jobs. By the end of the study, students had interviewed well over forty theatrical workers. Students learned about the jobs of producer, playwright, director, choreographer, fight director, and set, light and costume designer. In addition, students examined the jobs that were carried out during an actual performance by actors, stagehands, stage managers, ushers, make-up artists, dressers, box office workers, and house managers.

Leading students through a study of a place required teachers to facilitate firsthand encounters that provided students with knowledge of their community and that validated their experiences outside the classroom as well as their personal knowledge (Vascellaro, 2011). Teaching students to use their background knowledge and critical thinking skills to gather information during interviews and on trips was a significant undertaking. These techniques became important ways for students to discover answers to their own and their classmates' inquiries.

Before each interview, students formulated questions as a group by thinking about what they knew about a particular job. Interviews were also developed from previous ones, as students noticed similarities among job responsibilities, processes employed, and materials used. Furthermore, students began to see how certain jobs were closely connected to each other. During each interview individual students asked questions that were prepared by the entire class. Every student had a turn to ask questions, but it was everyone's job to listen for significant information that would help the entire group. Students learned how to ask salient questions that would help them perform a particular job. They asked the playwright: How do you get your ideas? The actor: How long does it take to memorize your lines? The box office worker: How do you know which ticket to give a person? Additional questions were asked at the end of each interview to explore new ideas generated by the interaction with the interviewee.

During the interview, each guest demonstrated something related to his or her job. Students learned about vocal warm-ups from an actor, how to give cues from a stage manager, and how to do a quick change from a wardrobe worker. During theater trips students were shown how to do the job in the actual environment, and when appropriate, allowed to try it out. While visiting a box office worker and house manager at one midtown theater, students acted out their jobs using a variety of tools.

After each interview, the class met to discuss their observations and any remaining questions. Teachers supported students' language as they generated key words to describe the places and jobs they encountered. These lists of key words were used as references to help guide students to write reflections in their notebooks.



Usher, Director, and Wardrobe research notebooks.

The ongoing writing process taught students the value of documenting and reflecting on their learning experiences. Students were also encouraged to use illustrations to visualize and make sense of the theater workers' responsibilities and tools. They then transferred their job knowledge into shared books of written narratives and drawings.

Studying the theater as a place by interacting with both theater workers and the environment allowed students to demonstrate relational thinking in a concrete way. Students' notes, photographs, illustrations, shared books, and experiences with role-playing were used in the next phase of the study when they selected a particular job and carried out all responsibilities associated with it.



Books about theater.

Recreating Theatrical Understandings

The second phase of the study began with the writing of a script. Using the class interview with a playwright as a resource, along with the students' in-depth knowledge from a four-month fairy tale study conducted in kindergarten, the class began to generate ideas for a script. Using a familiar fairy tale structure empowered students as they rose to the complex challenge of writing a script with scenes, dialogue, and stage directions. Teachers asked analytical questions and modeled potential language. Students began to learn about the relationships among characters, words, and actions as they spontaneously acted out scenes to help them develop the language for the script.

Writing the shared script required teachers to balance a story structure that would guide students' thinking, while listening carefully to their ideas and helping them ensure that their writing made sense. The script-writing process taught students about the democratic process, and students often voted on which lines to use and whether or not to add on to someone else's idea. The final piece of the script writing involved the teachers selecting songs from Broadway musicals and helping students incorporate them into each scene.

After the script was completed, the students returned to their research notebooks and other resources to reflect on the jobs they were most interested in. Students received a list of theater jobs and ranked them in order of preference. Students were encouraged to choose a job based on their interests, strengths, and talents. They also wrote reflective pieces explaining why a particular job would be a good match for them. Teachers were encouraged to apply this information to match students to a job that would use their strengths while at the same time challenge them to stretch and grow.

Using their knowledge of this newly acquired job as well as the resources collected in the first phase of the study, students developed a new set of specific questions related to their script. The

costume designers wondered: How do we design a costume for a clam? The stagehands: How do we move a three dimensional tree? The wardrobe workers: When is our cue for a quick change? By identifying what was unknown about a job, students could focus in on how to do the job more effectively.

Theater workshops established a place in the classroom where students became actors reading scripts, box office workers making lists of materials they would need, set designers sketching pictures of potential scenes, choreographers creating dance patterns, costume designers looking through books for inspiration, and stagehands reviewing the script to decide when they would need to move items to and from the stage. Students were given time to role-play their jobs inside the classroom. As the students' work progressed, parents offered up their own talents (e.g., sewing costumes, playing in the orchestra, printing posters and ads). A theater production being implemented by six-year-olds began to emerge and blossom.



Clockwise: Set design, Costume design, and Box Office Workers.

The Show Goes On

The theater study culminated with the first graders performing their jobs, which would allow an audience of adults and children to experience a “real” theater production for two evenings. The first performance was billed as the “preview,” followed by the official “opening night.” The evening began with a student presentation of a museum (in the rear of the theater) that displayed all of the student work generated during the study (e.g., research notebooks, script, set and costume designs). The student set and costume designers, fight directors, and choreographers took audience members through the process they used to help create the musical. In some instances, audience members even got to participate. After watching the fight directors demonstrate the choreographed sword sequence, for example, audience members had the chance to be coached by the directors and try it out themselves.



Student demonstrating fight techniques.

Following the museum presentation, the front-of-house workers “opened the house” to welcome the patrons and role-play their jobs. Six-year-old box office workers presented audience members with “will call” tickets at the homemade box office. Six-year-old ticket takers ripped tickets and told individuals where to find six-year old ushers who then led them to their exact seat location

and handed them a Playful (their version of a Playbill). Each Playful contained information about the scenes, songs, and company. Not only did actors have biographies, but so did each and every student.



Once the audience was seated, it was time for the stage manager to enter and welcome everyone to the musical. After reminding patrons to turn off their cellphones and “other electronic devices,” the first grade conductor (dressed in a tuxedo) took the podium to lead the ten-piece orchestra made up of teachers, parents, and community members. The overture began. Stagehands prepared each scene with needed props, scenery, and lighting. The actors sang and danced, while wardrobe workers did quick changes in full view of the audience at stage left. The place (the theater) that was once a mystery became a place of knowledge, competence and active learning. By enacting each job in the context of a real show, students demonstrated their knowledge and understanding of each theater job, and the collaboration that was required to make it a success.

By using place-based teaching and learning approaches, teachers guided students to explore and question in order to develop knowledge that emerged from an analysis of a specific place in their

local school community. Through this theater study, teachers emphasized learning experiences that enabled students to become creators of their own knowledge, and utilized community members (e.g., parents and theater workers) into an active role in the classroom (Smith, 2002). Students gathered information by attending shows, interviewing experts, visiting theaters, watching videos, and reading books. Students recorded their findings by writing individual accounts and reflections, and writing and illustrating shared texts. Through all of this, students studied a place in an active and meaningful manner.

When considering the impact of this first grade placed-based theater study, it was clear that “the physical setting of a study, the where, profoundly influenced the what of curriculum [and] the substance of what they [teachers and students] learned” (Vascellaro, 2011, p. 61). In order to make the theater curriculum happen, teachers had to step out of their comfort zones in the classroom and reach out to the school and neighboring community for resources. Teachers viewed themselves as collaborative curriculum makers with students, teachers, and community members as critical partners. The agency of these teachers in curriculum making rested in their capacity to enter into interactive relationships with their students, the content, and the processes of learning (Schwab, 1960 as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). No instruction was so rigid as to impede artistic judgment and action, or the frequent and spontaneous choices needed to meet the varying teaching and learning situations. Through this process students were exposed to a variety of role models inside and outside the school who engaged them in a rich body of content (Vascellaro, 2011). Students developed academic skills in authentic ways as they used strategies to gather, organize, and apply the content of the study.

Studying a place in the local school neighborhood enabled students, parents, teachers, and theater workers to experience the power and possibilities of hands-on real-world learning experiences. Students learned how to investigate a specific place well enough to take it apart and put it back together again. The students will never watch a live theatrical production the same way again. After learning separately about the importance of everyone’s role within a theatrical production, students were better able to understand each theater job through their own actions. They developed a multitude of skills and strategies from language arts, visual arts, mathematics, social studies and science to support their learning throughout the theater study. Teachers were committed to helping students tap into their own unique interests, abilities, and talents, which one day might help them all become contributing members of society—citizens who have realized their potential and followed their dreams.

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