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**Keywords:**

arts, puppetry, social development, curriculum, instruction, ESL, multicultural, Freese Elementary

**Abstract:**

This article describes the unique multicultural arts program that has developed at Freese Elementary School, located only 20 minutes from the United States-Mexico border, in the southeastern corner of the San Diego Unified School District. The Arts and Culture Magnet



Program at Freese grew out of the need build bridges in a neighborhood where rapid demographic change had created explosive tensions. The magnet program teaches visual and performing arts, literacy, and social studies through in-class artist residencies, workshops, field trips, and assemblies that have been developed in collaboration with local arts organizations. Through the arts, Freese has become a bright and cheery school where children are busy learning, an island of hope in a neighborhood beset by conflict.



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## Helping Children Cross Cultural Boundaries in the Borderlands:

### Arts Program at Freese Elementary Creates Cultural Bridges

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The U.S.-Mexico Border Region, as defined by the 1983 La Paz Agreement, is the area within 100 kilometers (about 62.5 miles) on either side of the international border. Extending 1,952 miles, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, this region has in recent years been subject to explosive population growth (from 6.9 million in 1980 to 13 million in 2005). News reports focusing on this area have tended to emphasize the political and environmental challenges associated with rapid demographic and economic change. However, there are success stories as well. This article focuses on Freese Elementary School, where the Mapping the Beat lessons sponsored by National Geographic were first implemented. This is a school that has used the arts to create many bridges among ethnic groups in a volatile corner of San Diego.



*1: Second grade student at Freese Elementary, learning drumming and percussion.*

The Arts and Culture Magnet Program at Freese Elementary grew out of the urgent need to build understanding in a turbulent neighborhood where rapid demographic change had created explosive tensions. Two decades ago, the great majority of the school's students were African-American. Now, over half of Freese students are English language learners. The ethnic heritage of the current student body is 56.2 percent Hispanic, 28 percent African American, 7.9 percent Filipino, 4.1 percent White, 1.7 percent Pacific Islander, 1.2 percent Indochinese, and 1 percent "Other". The magnet program at Freese is described in official school district literature (Freese Elementary Profile) as follows:

The instructional focus at Freese is to teach grade level literacy, social studies, and visual and performing arts standards through arts and culture field trips, assemblies, in-class artist residencies, and family workshops developed in collaboration with San Diego arts organizations and the arts departments of local universities and colleges.

The cultural arts magnet program at Freese Elementary was an outgrowth of activities initiated by art teacher Mary Pat Hutt, who had cultivated strong partnerships with community arts organizations. These partnerships enabled students at Freese to go to concerts and museums, as well as to benefit from classroom visits from teaching artists. Eventually, the school applied for magnet designation with the theme, “Enhanced Literacy through Arts and Culture” (eventually changed to “Arts and Culture”). The goal was that all content areas would be taught through the arts. The magnet program was initiated in the 2001-02 school year.

The arts integration approach being implemented at Freese also appears to have had an impact on student achievement. The California Department of Education calculates the Academic Progress Index (API) scores for all public schools. The API calculates school achievement on a scale from 0 to 1000. Schools with a score of 800 or more are considered to be high performing. Freese's API score has been climbing since the measurement began. In 1999, Freese's

API was 625. By 2009, Freese's API was 755. Given the challenges faced by this school and its students, this steady improvement is impressive.



2: Malashock Dance Company's Molly Puryear working with 5<sup>th</sup> graders on “Dancing the Solar System.”

Why should the arts have such an effect? Children’s language development is based on active listening. Wong Fillmore and Snow (2000) argue that children need direct and frequent verbal interaction with individuals who know the second language well and can provide the English learner with accurate feedback. Classrooms in which children are expected to sit quietly at their desks provide limited opportunity for such interaction. In contrast, visual and performing arts lessons can provide many opportunities for children to mime, act out, respond with gestures, follow predictable routines, and get feedback. This allows children to experiment with the new language while they are still learning its rules and structure.

### Curriculum as a Social Justice Issue

In recent decades, theories of how the mind works have changed dramatically. Scientific investigations of cognition, memory, human development and the relation of these to social context have challenged long-held conceptions of learning. There is an increasing acceptance of the idea that, if we are to educate students effectively, we must teach in ways that are compatible with what has been discovered about mental processes. At the same time, an alternative vision for education has evolved that focuses on a new imperative: promotion of optimal development of *intellective competence* in every person (Gordon & Bridglall, 2007).

Intellective competence includes an evolving ability to bring order to the potential chaos of an information welter: the capacity to hypothesize and confirm relationships between disparate phenomena, the cognitive skills needed to reason by analogy and metaphor, and the broad disposition to *use* these intellectual tools to make sense of one's experience and to think and act intelligently in a complex world (Martinez, 2007, p. x).

Such competence originates, in part, in academic experience, but emerges also from interactions with family, peers, and community. The challenge posed by this broader understanding of intellectual competence is that it is less easily transmitted than the knowledge assessed by standardized, multiple-choice tests. Historically, children born into academically privileged situations have been primed to achieve optimal intellectual development, while children not exposed to such subcultures have had less opportunity to develop the broad range of skills needed to engage successfully with the demands of school and the broader world.

This article looks at a cultural arts magnet school that has focused steadily on imparting such intellective competencies to students living in a diverse community only 20 minutes by car from the United States-Mexico border. Located in the southeastern corner of the San Diego Unified School District, Freese Elementary was not only the first school to implement the Mapping the Beat curriculum after it was funded by a grant from National Geographic, but it has continued to pursue arts integration across all grade levels through its Cultural Arts Magnet Program, building a vibrant school culture in a turbulent neighborhood.



3: La Jolla Playhouse Student Pop Tour performing at Freese Elementary in San Diego, California.

### Enhancing Educational Quality through the Arts

To understand the spirit and inner life of a people--the joys, values, and drives that caused it to find life tolerable and meaningful--one must examine its art, literature, philosophy, dances and music (William Fleming, 1970).

As Elliot Eisner (2004) has pointed out, “culture” has two meanings. In the anthropological sense, a culture is a shared way of life. In the biological sense, a culture is a medium for growing things. Both definitions are of importance for educators: schools provide the conditions for a shared way of life, yet also serve as cultures for growing things. What schools grow (or at least aspire to grow) are minds. They do so through a designed environment that includes, but is not exhausted by, the curriculum. This designed environment defines the



content—ideas, values, and skills—that becomes a significant part of the child’s cognitive repertoire.

In their pre-kindergarten years, children spend a large proportion of their waking hours engaged in expressive activities such as drawing, painting, molding clay, singing; pre-K children enthusiastically pretend to be heroes, babies, monsters, animals. Then, as soon as these children arrive at school, they are expected to put such activities aside and sit quietly at desks. Today’s kindergarten classrooms have come to resemble the first grade classrooms of decades past, emphasizing formal reading and math instruction, instead of play and socialization (Elkind 2001; Hatch and Freeman 1988; Plevyak and Morris 2002; Shepard and Smith 1989).



4: Freese 1<sup>st</sup> graders starting to paint a giant puppet with teaching artist, Felix Diaz.

This situation is especially problematic for children who speak a language other than English at home. When young English learners first enter a traditional U.S. public school, they attempt to use their home language to communicate with teachers and peers (Saville-Troike 1987; Tabors 1997). Gradually, the children realize they are not being understood. At this point, a shift occurs. The child begins to actively attend to the new language (Ervin-Tripp 1974; Hakuta 1987, Itoh and Hatch 1978; Tabors 1997). At this stage, the child will attempt to communicate nonverbally, using gestures and facial expressions. A third stage occurs when the child masters



5: Mainly Mozart Assembly at Freese Elementary.

the rhythm and the intonation of English, as well as some key phrases (Tabors 1997). In the fourth stage, the child learns vocabulary and moves into productive language use; children express themselves by using their own words (Tabors 1997). At this stage, the child demonstrates a general understanding of the rules of English and applies them more accurately.

In classrooms where verbal interactions are limited, where student assignments center on worksheets filled out in isolation, English learners lack the cues needed to understand what is being asked of them. Research studies have shown that arts integration can be a powerful tool for helping all

students engage in meaningful learning (Bresler 1995; Brewer 2002), with depth of understanding (Eisner 1998), in ways that directly connect with, and transfer to, children's lived experience (Luftig 2000). The multimodal learning characteristic of visual and performing arts classes is especially valuable for English language learners.

At Freese Elementary, arts instruction is provided by professional teaching artists. Each classroom receives approximately eight weekly lessons in music, visual art, dance, theater and/or puppetry (drama) on a rotating basis, for a total of 32 hours of arts instruction during the school year. In this article the focus will be on the K-2 puppetry curriculum delivered by teaching artists from the San Diego Guild of Puppetry. This focus was chosen because of the connection that puppetry and drama activities have to social-emotional development. That was considered to be of special importance because, although Freese is a bright and cheery school where children are busy learning, the surrounding neighborhood has repeatedly been beset by conflict. For example, between January and March, 2009 (when this study was carried out), 15 aggravated assaults and a total of 17 violent crimes were reported in the neighborhood (City of San Diego, 2009).

### Data Sources

Through in-depth interviews, teachers, teaching artists and administrators shared their observations regarding the effect of artist visits and arts integration on student learning, social-emotional development, and the culture of Freese Elementary School. Open-ended interview questions were used so as to draw out teachers' spontaneous observations. Interviews varied in length from 20 to 40 minutes, depending upon the length of responses. Classroom observations of teaching artist lessons were also carried out. Archival documents and photographs were used to flesh out and provide detail to descriptions of curriculum and of student academic progress. Interviews were conducted by a professional interviewer who met with personnel at Freese Elementary during the elementary teachers' free periods in Spring semester, 2009.

### Teaching Children Who Do Not Speak English at Home

In the words of Lynne Jennings, Executive Director of the San Diego Guild of Puppetry:

[The arts workshops] open teachers' eyes to how excited their kids get about the process, how engaged they are, how kids that often have difficulties in the regular classroom exhibit gifts and strengths and talents and abilities that their teachers may not have known they possessed.



6: Freese kindergartener singing in English and Spanish with teaching artist, Felix Diaz.

The arts program has been a key component in building a supportive school culture. This is especially the case for Latino and Filipino children whose families speak a language other than English at home. As a second grade teacher noted: "I've had kids who would not participate in the classroom. When they're in art or dance, they participate... Sometimes I can't reach them and only the teaching artists can."

In some of the arts classes, English and Spanish were used side by side. In one kindergarten music class, the teaching artist began by singing "La Sorpresa", then drew pictures on chart paper, as he explained, in English, what happened in the song. That way, whether the

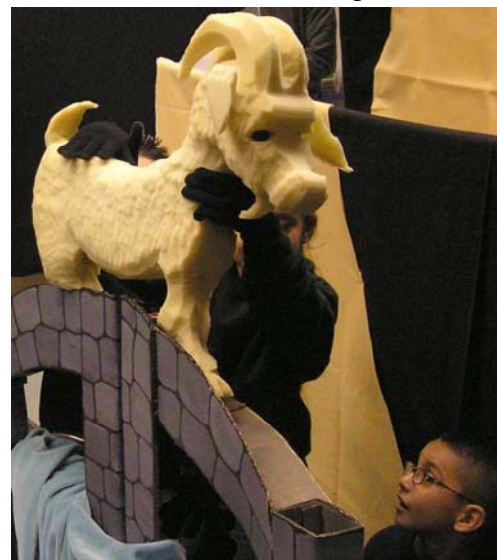


7: Freese Kindergarteners learning to perform Eric Carle's "Very Hungry Caterpillar"

kindergartners sitting around him spoke English or Spanish at home, they could glance at the pictures to remind themselves of the meaning of the lyrics. Teaching artist Felix Diaz then taught the song in Spanish, singing the lyrics phrase by phrase. First, the teaching artist sang a phrase, then the children echoed it, accompanied by the teaching artist on guitar. Later on, movements were added to go with the lyrics. Finally, the children put words and movements together, singing the entire song with guitar accompaniment.

Only a limited number of staff members spoke Spanish well enough to teach in this manner, however. As in most California schools, classes were routinely taught in English, using a structured immersion approach to provide a supportive environment in which English language learners could gradually become more familiar with the vocabulary and structure of a new language. What was special about Freese was the way that the arts and culture magnet program used arts integration to support both academic learning and social-emotional development.

In puppet theater, any student can play any part. One is not limited by size, age, gender, ethnic origin, or physical /verbal ability. All that matters is one's ability to imagine and create a believable character, then bring it to life. This flexibility allows the child puppeteer to try out different roles, metaphorically learning what it is like to walk in another's shoes. Often students behave differently in the puppet theater program than in the regular classroom. A shy child may happily portray a bold, brash character, while a child who has difficulty keeping still in class may focus intently on manipulating a puppet to portray a slow-moving, timid creature.



8: Freese 1<sup>st</sup> graders performing "Three Billy Goats Gruff."



The following dialogue took place in a first grade workshop taught by members of the San Diego Guild of Puppetry. Children sat on the carpet, attentively watching a teaching artist standing next to the puppet stage, who explained: “These black sweatshirts and black gloves are what you will be wearing when your puppets perform on-stage. Why do you suppose you would want to wear black when you are performing?” [The children looked puzzled.] “Think about it. Watch when I put the puppet in front of ‘Franklin’ when he is wearing black. What do you see?” [The puppet!] “So the audience sees the puppet and doesn’t notice the puppeteer when you are wearing black.” [Many children grin at the thought of disappearing.]

This class is preparing to reenact the story of the “Three Billy Goats Gruff.” Many of the children speak Spanish at home, so the opportunity to practice oral English is an important aspect of the puppetry program provided by the San Diego Guild of Puppetry. The teaching artist reminds them: “We have to remember to send our voices out to the audience. When you are a puppeteer, down behind the stage, you have to be sure and project your voices.”

Children raise their hands and eagerly volunteer for various roles. The teaching artist chooses puppeteers to play the major roles, then directs the attention of the class to the side of the stage. “Now let’s look at the rhythm instruments over here. Remember when we took a fieldtrip last week?” [Nods.] “Where did the musicians sit?” [In front of the stage.] “The place where they sat, what was that called? ... an orchestra...?” [Pit!]

“Yes, and that’s what our musicians are going to do, sit in a special place. The people who use the instruments will sit over here. You have to watch carefully, so that what you play will complement the movement of the puppets.” (The teaching artist has the littlest goat cross the stage and demonstrates using a tortoiseshell and stick to create the sound of small goat steps. Then the medium-sized goat crosses stage and a small drum is used to create the sound of his medium-sized steps.)



9: Freese 1<sup>st</sup> graders creating musical accompaniment to “Three Billy Goats Gruff” with puppetry teaching artist, Van Tran.

To a casual onlooker, the wide range in English proficiency in the class might not be readily apparent, since, during the puppetry activities, there was always a rewarding role for each child to play.

Although not all of the children felt confident playing one of the major on stage roles, the need for sound effects and scenery expanded the number of roles available. What was most important was the imaginative engagement of all class members. By imagining the hopes and fears of famished goats trying to cross a bridge guarded by a hungry troll, all of the children could bring to bear their life experiences, their abilities, their desires, their wishes, and their dreams. Whatever their level of facility with oral English, all of these human attributes were already in

place when they walked through the classroom door. The puppetry workshops simply tapped into this resource.

If a child did not know how to express her thoughts in the right words, the teaching artist might coach her, prompt her, rephrase the question, or suggest a portion of the response. Still, the focus remained on making sure that each class member was viewed as accountable for learning. The teaching artist supported students so that they could answer, but would *not* to remove children from the process. Instead, the focus was on equipping all to engage in the process.

As the Director of English Language Development (ELD) for the school district pointed out, arts classes used a different approach to English language development than was advocated by those classroom teachers who insisted: “We need risk-free environments.” Arts workshops were inherently “risk-taking” environments, where students were free to take risks. As the ELD director observed: “It’s always going to be risky putting yourself on the stage, showing your art, any of those things. There’s a personal risk.” But the rewards associated with stepping out and taking that risk made the arts workshops a worthwhile learning experience for all students.

Workshops in puppetry did not just encourage, but *required*, children to interact with each other and to use language in a variety of ways. This instilled confidence. At the beginning of the year, children might respond with only one or two words when asked a question. But, over time, students learned to provide more detail and precision in their answers. As they became more comfortable with discussion and volunteered longer answers, their language skills improved.

### Connecting Puppetry Lessons to Theater and English Language Arts Content Standards

The puppetry workshops incorporated both the California Theatre Standards and oral language portion of the English Language Arts Standards. However, since hand puppets are



frequently present in primary classrooms, it may not be immediately clear how the standards-based lessons offered in the Freese puppetry workshops differed from the use of puppets in other schools. This section offers a brief overview of an eight-lesson puppetry unit for kindergartners, built around Eric Carle’s *Very Busy Spider*. (Please see “On-line Resources” at the end of this article for downloadable copies of K-2 puppetry lesson plans.) The learning objectives were as follows:

- ❖ *Focus*: developing students’ ability to concentrate
- ❖ *Improvisation*: developing students’ ability to think on their feet
- ❖ *Verbal and Physical Expression*:

10: Freese kindergartners engaged in a clapping based puppetry warm up exercise.

developing students' ability to speak to an audience with emotional range and evocative movement (both as live and/or masked actors and as puppeteers), bringing a puppet to life through growing manipulation skills

- ❖ *Projection*: developing students' ability to be heard, be seen and be present, as both actors and puppeteers
- ❖ *Understanding*: develop students' cognition and critical thinking skills
- ❖ *Problem Solving*: developing the thinking skills necessary to lead to logical and positive conclusions.

In the first lesson, children begin learning the vocabulary of theater (character, audience, puppet, cooperation), discuss differences between real people and imaginary characters, create movements for various characters in *The Very Busy Spider*, and act out characters in the story. The lesson begins with a warm-up, which is described below. This helps focus student attention.

<i>CLAP...</i>	<i>SAY</i>	<i>GESTURE</i>
Clap one	1, sun	(stretch arms up and out as though reaching for the sun)
Clap two	1,2, me and you	(point to yourself and then to students)
Clap three	1,2,3, earth, air, sea	(on "earth" scrunch close to floor and hold out hands, stretch fingers wide, close to floor; on "air" stretch up to toes, stretch arms to sky; on "sea" make waving movement with both hands)
Clap four	1,2,3,4, stomp on the floor	(stomp one time on each word)
Clap five	1, 2, 3, 4, 5 jump and jive	(On "jump and jive", do three tiny jumps, side to side: right, left, right")
	jump jive	(On "jump jive", do one little jump, then a quick shimmy down and up)

This lively warm-up is followed by a quiet session on the carpet during which the story is introduced and children discuss: the difference between a book and a play; what a puppet is and does; the jobs of actors, puppeteers, and audience. As the book is read, the teaching artist stops to ask children how each character moves and what sounds it makes. The class experiments with movement and sound. Then, they talk about "pretending" and how a puppet character is different from a real character. After this, the children stand and parade in a circle, acting out each animal's movements and sounds. This is done in the order that each animal appears in the story; this is a first step toward developing sequencing.

When the children sit down on the carpet again, the teaching artist brings out the puppets, one at a time. Student(s) are chosen to manipulate each puppet, walking it around the circle, working on movement and cooperation



11: "Neigh, neigh!" ... "Want to go for a ride?" said the horse to the spider, as Freese kindergarteners perform "Very Busy Spider."

(as most are two-person puppets). The rest of the class joins in and makes the sounds of the puppet. Afterward, the teaching artist asks the class: “What did we learn about the job of an actor? Of a puppeteer? Of an audience member? What was it like to do the movement and the sound? What choices did the characters make that you agreed with? That you disagreed with?” During the week between lessons, when the class is moving from the classroom to another location, the teacher may have the class practice moving like the animals in *The Very Busy Spider*. When reading other books with students, the teacher may have the children speak as the characters in the story would and experiment with different movements.

Lesson Two introduces the concept of a narrator and the difference between an actor and a narrator. As the children sit in a circle and practice manipulating each puppet, the teaching artist plays the part of the narrator. As children each take their turn, the narrator suggests different movement possibilities for each puppet: walk slowly, walk fast, move as if afraid, move as if angry, take one step forward and two back, etc. The rest of class joins in, making the sounds of a puppet. The teaching artist talks about what happens in a performance, and the order in which things happen. (Lights in the room go down; the show is announced; performance begins, proceeds to the middle of the story, finally ends; everyone applauds). The class walks through the sequence from turning down the room lights to the final applause.

In Lesson Three, the children create rod puppets with cardboard and magic markers, then use them to recreate the story. In Lesson Four, children use professionally designed puppets, and the concept of setting is introduced. The children begin to work with the stage they will be using for their performance. They learn how puppets need to move across it. Students pretend they are tiny spiders being blown across the room by 1) a gentle breeze and 2) a brisk wind. In Lesson Five, the teaching artist demonstrates four stage directions: cross, entrance, exit, and down center. The teaching artist also leads a discussion about what rehearsal means. Everyone is expected to sit in the audience until their turn comes. The class discusses why both the audience and the puppeteers are equally important: a puppeteer needs an audience to perform for; an audience needs a performance to watch and enjoy. During Lesson Six, roles are chosen for the final performance. Lesson Seven is a run through, in which the class experiments with sound effects to add dramatic effect to the performance. Lesson Eight is a dress rehearsal.

### **Partnerships with Community Organizations**

Since the teachers at Freese were not trained arts specialists, the arts lessons were delivered by teaching artists from the community. The teaching artists collaborated with classroom teachers to plan arts lessons that linked to lessons in other content areas. At the time that the magnet program was getting started, the San Diego school district was focusing strongly on raising test scores. Schools were discouraged from taking field trips. Freese, with its arts and culture magnet program, was one of the few San Diego schools able to actively partner with arts organizations. This gave rise to many opportunities to collaborate with organizations such as the San Diego State Theatre Department, the San Diego Guild of



12: Freese students at Mingei International Museum.



Puppetry, the Museum of Photographic Arts, and the La Jolla Music Society.

The pattern that evolved at Freese was that the teachers would meet with the teaching artists before the residency began, to talk about what they would be teaching during the weeks that the arts residency would be taking place. Magnet resource teacher, Mary Pat Hutt, recalled:

For example, the San Diego Guild of Puppetry would come in and meet with the first grade teachers. Typical questions would be: During your literacy “Units of Study”, which pieces of literature would you like us to focus on? What language skills do students most need to learn this year? Which would work best as puppet theater? Which would help build theater and verbal skills, as well as vocabulary?

Over time, the conversation with community arts organizations became more complex; residencies became longer and stronger. Planning meetings with the teachers and teaching artists expanded from one hour to three hours; specific plans were developed in regard to how the classroom teacher would build on the concepts introduced by the teaching artist during the rest of the week. Always driven by the California Content Standards, the school district adopted standards-based report cards, which increased the complexity of documentation. Changes in the demographics of the neighborhood surrounding Freese also drove curriculum changes. In the words of the magnet resource teacher,

Our population has changed dramatically. We’ve gone from pretty much 90% African American to where almost 60% of the kids are non-English speakers when they get here. So the challenges, particularly in terms of language, drive the curriculum... It’s that week in, week out ‘What skills are we building?’

The goal has been, as much as possible, to use the arts as a way of discovering meaning in each of the content areas taught at the elementary level. In the following section, teachers describe the impact that the arts workshops have had on the classroom learning environment.

### **Teachers Describe Experiences with Arts Integration**

During the school year, each Freese teacher has four arts rotations and spends two months (eight sessions) working with an artist on a specific project before moving to another artist and art form. Earlier, the benefits that a puppetry lesson on “Three Billy Goats Gruff” had for English language learners were discussed. However, little was said about the benefits that such a lesson had for the class as a whole. A first grade teacher recalled that same production:



*13: Freese Kindergarten Cooperation Conga Line: Body Movement Theater Warm Up*

That was at the beginning of the year, when they really weren’t very good readers yet. So we did a lot of rehearsal. They created a whole script for us, with a lot of rhyme. The kids learned the script and how to read it. It really helped them with

their reading and their expression. We did a lot of choral reading. We did pictures of the beginning, middle, and end. We wrote sentences, writing about the story.

Afterward, the visual art teaching artist expanded on the theme of animal stories, asking each first grade class which animal they would like to focus on. A teacher explained:

My class chose frogs. In art we did different pictures of frogs. Back in the classroom, we read some fiction frogs. Children made up their own story about a frog. Then we read about the life cycle of frog and did a four-page life cycle writing assignment. Now they have this frog folder that they're excited to take home because it has all the art work they've done on frogs and their writing too.



14: Freese student creating a frog in art class with teaching artist, Areceli Carrera.

To demonstrate the importance that puppetry lessons could have for individual children, the teacher described the response of one struggling student: “He was extremely low, with extremely poor behavior and very unfocused. He would say things like, ‘I suck.’ He was not happy and had a sad story. He always seemed to be fidgeting and not paying attention. The teaching artist continually warned him, ‘If you’re not going to try your best, you won’t be able to be in the final show.’ I was always wondering, ‘How is he going to do?’ We practiced and we practiced. Then we did the show and a lot of the parents came. He did a great job. He surprised me and was so proud of himself! He got to be the troll. I’d been wondering: “Oh, that’s the biggest part. Should he have that part?” But he did a super job. He had great voice projection. He remembered all his lines, which was hard for him, but he really practiced. Then one day after school, after the final performance, he was waiting and waiting for his family to pick him up. I could hear him up at the top of the stairs, repeating those lines that he had learned. And I thought, ‘Aww, that’s something that helped him! That’s something that he’s really proud of.’”

Another first grade teacher had a class with many English language learners who were still very uncertain in their grasp of English. She described the benefit of the puppetry workshops for her students: “Some of them are very shy or timid and don’t speak a lot. But when they have that puppet and they’re behind the stage, they know the ‘Trip trap trip trap. Who’s that tripping over my bridge?’ They feel comfortable saying the lines and feel confident in themselves. That’s what I’ve noticed. Shy students who never really get up and want to share or participate feel comfortable when they’re, like, somebody else ... a character. Then it’s not just them by themselves. They are with a friend, so they project their voices and speak up.”

Teachers also spoke frankly about behavioral challenges: “Discipline is very difficult at this school. Behaviors are difficult.” A teacher explained how the arts helped: “There’s some kids that, you know, give up or get frustrated or don’t want to try. You can have behavior problems that come out because of frustration or other things. Usually, when you’re with the

visiting artist, there's not really any kind of problem. Everybody wants to be involved and participate. Usually, behavior issues don't arise. Kids don't act up because they want to be there. It's not, 'This is too hard for me so, instead, I'll act out.' It's enjoyable and fun. So, I think that kind of reels them back into school for awhile."



15: Freese students dancing "Verbs."

A second grade teacher described how she had begun integrating the visual arts into her own teaching: "Having so many English learners in my classroom, a lot of times I'll have them draw a picture before they write to give them a jumping off point from which to begin. In the beginning of the year, writing a story is pretty overwhelming for little kids. So I'll say, 'Draw a picture of your family on vacation this summer. Where'd you go? OK, make sure that's in your picture. What did you do there? Make sure that's in your picture.' Then, when they're done with their pictures, I'll say, 'OK, now look at your picture. Write a story about what you drew.' That's particularly effective with English learners."

The second graders also integrated language arts into their dance lessons. A teacher explained: "For dance, we'll start with verbs. The teaching artist will say, 'I want you to slide across the room. Now I want you to jump.' So, I'll take verbs that we've gone over in dance and I'll do lessons around them in the classroom ... We all work together... It's hard to get all your kids on board with every lesson, every day, every standard. [The arts] really just give us new energy about approaching standards in different ways than we've always taught them."

For the teachers, the most memorable collaboration had been in the 2005-06 school year, when they had focused on children's author, Gerald McDermott, for the whole Spring term. Much of McDermott's work is based upon folktales and legends. As a teacher recalled:

We did a lot of visual art and dancing around his book *Coyote: A Trickster Tale from the American Southwest*. We read all his different books. At the end of the year we did a huge Gerald McDermott parade celebration. He came down and he was here, signing autographs. I mean it was a



16: Award winning, author/illustrator Gerald McDermott with Freese's principal, Midge Backensto at the school's "Gerald McDermott Day" Celebration.



huge thing. The kids had all of the things they'd drawn, things they'd written. It was just a huge celebration. And it was just so positive. The kids were just in awe that Gerald McDermott actually came.

The kids had written to him all year, "Please come. We really love your work. Your book's my favorite book." Then he came, and it was just... the kids' jaws just dropped because it was a surprise. And we had his stuff all over the school, banners, and people were taking pictures. Those kids still remember that day. Every book he's ever written. That was powerful."

### **Creating an Oasis of Safety in a Struggling Neighborhood**

The sound of gunfire is a sad reality in southeastern San Diego, where children are afraid to walk home from school and the concentration of gang members is higher than in any other area of the city. (Green, 2005)

Freese Elementary is located in southeastern San Diego. The San Diego Police Department's Southeastern Division includes some of the city's peak crime areas. Local residents, many of whom are Latino or African-American, face the challenge of dealing with street gangs, drug dealing, burglary, robbery, assaults and occasional homicides (Caldwell, 2004). On many residential streets, the decorative item of choice is iron bars over ground-floor windows and doors. In these neighborhoods, people struggle to earn a living and raise their children in safety.

Former San Diego City Council member George Stevens (who represented the area for 11 years) campaigned doggedly against the use of the term "southeast San Diego" by the city, eventually driving it from official use. He saw the term as "a shorthand to signal a crime-ridden neighborhood dominated by poor people—an image he said was inaccurate and unfair" (Powell, 2006). Yet, this area of the city continues to struggle with multiple handicaps. Inevitably, this has an effect on local public schools. Children who must walk through dangerous streets to get to school often need an opportunity to work through the tensions and challenges they have experienced in their lives outside of school. The visual and performing arts provide a valuable outlet.



*17: Freese 3<sup>rd</sup> graders gather for a class picture after their performance of Gerald McDermott's, "Coyote."*

### **Bringing a Community Together So a School Can Thrive**

What makes Freese Elementary remarkable cannot be understood merely by observing in classrooms or talking with teachers. The social context where Freese teachers and teaching artists work is extraordinary. In the photograph below (taken about a half-hour drive from the school), a small fence separates densely populated Tijuana, Mexico, from the United States. The U.S.-



Mexico border stands out clearly. In the neighborhood in which Freese Elementary is embedded, the divisions are not so stark. But for meaningful human encounters to take place across the real and metaphoric borders that separate cultural enclaves in this region, a mutually acceptable meeting ground must be established.

The arts can help create a cultural meeting place within the classroom. Although situated in the far southeastern corner of the San Diego Unified School District, in a very different world from the sparkling beaches along the California coast or the affluent suburbs that line the northern tier of San Diego County, the teachers and children at Freese have cultivated important allies within San Diego's lively arts scene. Magnet Resource Teacher Mary Pat Hutt is a familiar face—and voice on the phone—to the education staff at major arts institutions. The assiduous cultivation of such contacts has brought invaluable resources to the school, energizing teachers and inspiring students. But what does this partnership look like from the other side?



18: View of US/Mexican border divide.

One of the current teaching artists gave workshops at Freese before it became an arts and culture magnet school. She recalled:

It was tough. There were some sixth graders here, at that point, that scared me. They were taller than I was. A lot of them were eleven, twelve, going on forty-five. They were wannabe gang members. There were girls strutting their stuff who didn't seem to give a dang about education. Yet we came in. We did a lot of exercises where kids had the freedom to express themselves as they wished. And we saw these tough, cool gang wannabes become some of the softest, gentlest young people you can imagine. We said, "Whoa, there are kids living inside these cool characters! There's absolutely nothing to be afraid of. We love this school! We want to come back." It feels like home. I love this place.

Although the magnet program has never drawn many students from San Diego's more affluent neighborhoods, quite a few students do transfer to Freese from schools in southeastern San Diego, drawn by the school's indefinable culture of hope. As the teaching artist quoted above pointed out, "The neighborhood, in essence, has not changed. The basic conditions under which kids have to live have not changed." However, through the arts program, the culture of the school has become more open and supportive. Children feel less of a need to be on guard while they are on the school grounds. Former students often return to visit, having come to see the school staff as akin to family. The harsh realities of daily life in a struggling neighborhood remain. Yet, a pervasive sense of possibility inhabits the school grounds.

### On-line Resources

Downloadable K-2 Puppetry Lessons from Freese: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/puppetry-grades>

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### **Photographic Credits**

- 1-17. San Diego Guild of Puppetry  
[http://www.sandiegoguildofpuppetry.org/Guild\\_Site\\_6.0/Opening\\_page.html](http://www.sandiegoguildofpuppetry.org/Guild_Site_6.0/Opening_page.html)
18. Sgt. First Class Gordon Hyde (2007). A small fence separates densely populated Tijuana, Mexico from the United States in the Border Patrol's San Diego Sector. This image is in the public domain: <http://www.defenselink.mil/multimedia/about.html>