

# Naseemah Mohamed

## A School has many Doors: How Local Arts Promote Global Learning

Artists are not victims. When a conventional classroom opens doors onto local art-making practices, to use a required text as the point of departure for students to create pictures, music, dance, meals, etc., students become users of the text as they learn to master it.

However disadvantaged they may be, teachers and students can and probably have experienced the freedom and the self-efficacy of art-making. The European Enlightenment philosopher and poet Friedrich Schiller named this capacity the *Spieltrieb*, the drive to play and to create. Schiller's response to violent uncertainty was to encourage us all to make more art from the oppressive material, to create new and pleasing forms that would bypass conflict and derail violence.

Pre-Texts is a teacher-training program that opens doors to let in the power of art to interpret and to innovate in order to achieve three integrated goals of good education: high order literacy, Innovation, and Citizenship. The theory behind Pre-Texts follows from contributions by Maria Montessori's project-centered pedagogy, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), and the pragmatic aesthetics of Friedrich Schiller and John Dewey. They all understood the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning. Three core objectives for students follow from integrating the arts as divergent languages of interpretation: 1. Ownership of texts; 2. Understanding creative (emotional) thinking as critical thinking; 3. Recognizing that interpretation involves one's own experience.

While workshops now extend from Boston to Bogota, throughout Latin America, in several sites in China, and in Africa, this paper will examine the outcomes of a 2011 project led by Naseemah Mohamed in a typical, low-resourced high-school classroom of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. It will examine the positive effects that the protocol it had on learning and as well as the more acute effects that the program had on classroom relationships, student motivation, corporal punishment and bullying and language acquisition.

During the summer of 2011, in a typical, low-resourced high-school classroom of Bulawayo, forty-five high school students were engaged in an atypical English class. They were translating Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* into music, dance and most notably, Ndebele, the second most widely spoken language native to Zimbabwe. The students wove between the two languages so seamlessly that one seemed to announce and to expect the other in a necessary relay. Research on language formation in multi-lingual classrooms would support this practice, but native languages had been punishable until then. Over the short six-week summer session, student-teacher relationships changed dramatically. Teachers stopped beating their students while students' fear of their teachers was replaced by respect and admiration. Formerly infamous for her beatings, "NaCharlene" earned this new affectionate Ndebele name. Students and teachers who discussed English literature in their mother tongue also explored new ways of thinking.

Students became so enthusiastic about reading and spinning interpretations through art that they rarely missed a day of the voluntary program, defying the norm and their teachers' expectations. Fifteen year-old Alice Dube remarked, "The program is helping me understand the teacher more easily, to be confident in my singing, acting, dancing and writing poetry. It is teaching me to be creative, and show the teacher what children like and want—we children can also contribute something." The egalitarian structure of Pre-Texts and the release from the

tyranny of one correct answer allowed students freedom of expression without the fear of being punished or ridiculed. Moreover, this newfound freedom was coupled with displays of individual student talents and particularities, which even the best of teachers can often underestimate in their regular classrooms.