

# A Teacher Talks about Folk Arts-Driven Educational Reform

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*Over the past four years, the Central Greene School District in rural, southwestern Pennsylvania has created a folklife/art curriculum project to help develop an understanding of cultural diversity that will have a lifelong impact on students. Poverty abounds in the county, where few non-Caucasians live. A recent Ku Klux Klan parade, cross burnings, and incidents between college students and local people troubled the education community.*

*A catalyst in this initiative to teach folklife and folk arts, elementary art teacher Susanne Nixdorf says that what she gained from folklife education training was a new way of looking at education, and she has become a key member of a team to pilot folklife standards and research students' cultural understanding.*

**O**UR FOLKLIFE / ART CURRICULUM PROJECT aims to increase students' understanding of the arts and their appreciation of their own and other's traditions through studying folklife concepts. Our primary commitment and direction have been guided by the premise that, with the arts as the focal point and the *Standards for Folklife Education* as the vehicle, young, rural children from an ethnically isolated area will develop knowledge that will lead to developing lasting multicultural understandings (see Sidener article, "Finding Folk Arts in Teachers' and Students' Lives").

The beginning of the folklife program in Central Greene was modest. In 1993, cultural anthropologist Linda Deafenbaugh began inservice training for a core of 3rd grade classroom teachers and art and music specialists in one school. Then she modeled lessons with 3rd graders and worked with teachers to develop further lesson plans, incorporating portfolio assessment practices.

Success was immediately evident. Students no longer simply laughed at pictures of unfamiliar cultural objects and events. They described what they saw and asked capable questions of visiting artists. They were respectful and interested. Developing portfolio practices furthered cross-disciplinary integration and provided content-appropriate assessment, extending the ethnographic tool of journal keeping into student learning across the curriculum.

Currently, 3rd and 4th graders in the District learn cultural concepts through investigating their own folk groups and folklife: oral history, folk arts, folk music, and celebrations. Starting by identifying their own cultural participation, students gain tools of vocabulary, research methods, reflective thinking, questioning, responding, and presentation techniques that prepare them to transfer their learning as they later explore diverse cultures. Student researchers have located

artists two previous folklife surveys missed. Since those artists have special bonds with students, they visit often.

Fifth-graders receive folklife instruction in language arts and social studies. A folklorist and classroom teacher conduct sessions in the classroom. Teachers identify topics to integrate into 5th grade curriculum: oral history, community lore, county architecture, local tales and legends, and researching local folk artists.

Over the years, Deafenbaugh expanded to include more teachers. Now students across the district study folklife in grades 3 to 6 as part of their regular instruction by folklife-trained teachers. Visiting artists are a regular feature, generally following the pattern of first studying one's own students' folk groups and then other cultures. Curriculum requirements govern choices: Pennsylvania studies, Africa, Latin America, etc.

The *Standards for Folklife Education* forms the conceptual basis for creating project curriculum, goals, and outcomes. The crucial assistance of Curriculum Director Linda McCracken gave teachers time for inservice training, planning, and creating multidisciplinary units. Funding has come from the State Arts Council, school district, and local PTAs to support artists and folklorist fees, teacher release time, and materials. The superintendent and school board have been enthusiastic in their financial support, regional and national presentations, and advocacy events.

The district needs for arts enrichment and cultural awareness have driven this project. By effectively incorporating the arts of everyday life and the artists of local communities, this project has won all-around support. Its development fortuitously coincided with the state-required development of local curriculum to fulfill new regulations. Thus, folklife and folk arts education drove education reform efforts, with local support, rather than the contention that marked other districts. Folklife and folk arts education deliver parental and community involvement in education in a meaningful way. Most important, students are engaged.

When I was conducting a year-end portfolio interview last spring, I asked a student what she wanted to study in folklife next year. She replied, "Well, other cultures, of course. It doesn't matter which ones. They're all interesting."