

# **Teaching Literacy Through the Arts**

## **A Series of Professional Development Workshops for Columbus Public School Educators**

Presented by the Institute for Education and the Arts  
in cooperation with the Columbus Public Schools

### **SESSION 1**

## **Integrating Literacy, Learning and Arts Education: Building on the African-American Experience**

**OCTOBER 21, 2005**



INSTITUTE for EDUCATION and the ARTS  
Education Alive!

# Background

On October 21, 2005, the **Institute for Education and the Arts** sponsored a workshop for Columbus (Ohio) Public Schools teachers. This workshop is the first in a series of four organized by Sally Kriska, the Institute's coordinator in Columbus. The series focuses on the teaching of literacy through the arts for students in grades K-12 and helps teachers discover how to use cultural diversity and the arts as enrichment, celebration and leverage for student achievement.

Each workshop uses a different art form and focuses on a different cultural heritage and population of the city of Columbus. All of the sessions are interactive and begin with a presentation on current and relevant research on arts in education and a presentation of personal stories about the power of arts education. This is followed by an arts demonstration, including participant involvement, of how that art form is related to literacy standards. The concluding segment of the day is a question and answer session for participants and presenters, which includes discussion of the challenges of teaching literacy through the arts and culture.

This first workshop focuses on the African-American Experience and the art form presented was African Drumming and Dancing by Susan Bradford and the Thiossaneone Dance Group.

What follows are the transcripts of the morning presentations of this workshop. First Dr. Cynthia Dillard, Associate Professor at The Ohio State University, spoke about her work and research with African Americans in the United States and African learners in Ghana. Second, Ms. Tei Street, Director of Education for the City of Columbus, spoke about her personal experience of how the arts saved her as an adolescent and her current work in promoting the arts in the lives of all children in Columbus.

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#### **Integrating Literacy, Learning and Arts Education: Building on the African-American Experience**

The Davis Complex Youth Performing Arts Center at Franklin Park  
Columbus, Ohio

**OCTOBER 21, 2005**

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The Ohio Arts Council  
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and others

Transcribed and adapted by Jennifer A. Salmon

**PART I:****Presentation by Dr. Cynthia B. Dillard**

Associate Professor, The Ohio State University

College of Education, Department of Teaching and Learning

**Dr. Dillard:** Much of my research focuses on how autobiographies (who we are as people and our lived experiences) affect the way teachers structure and create space for creative expressions of our students' cultural understandings. I wanted to start with the autobiographies [of the people here] in this room. We can't start talking about African-American children without talking about who we are in relation to African-American children. Too often we speak of wanting to support them and wanting to know who they are, but my experiences and my research tells me that we are actually focusing on ourselves. I want to start there.

I want you to spend a few minutes thinking about who you are as a teacher, as a human being. Who are you? Who are you? How do you describe yourself culturally? Not how does somebody else describe you, but how do you describe yourself culturally? Who and what contributed to your understanding of yourself as a cultural being?

**Audience Participant:** I went to the Columbus public schools, so I learned to refer to myself as an African-American woman, but during that time I was also called zebra, eightball and all of that. I went to Ohio State and to the Military. During that time I really started to connect with my culture because I was the only Black person in my class. So as a teacher in Columbus Public Schools I see the students as myself, and I am able to relate to them in a very special way because I went to the same school, I walked in the same hall, and things like that. I want them to see how special they are.

**Second Audience Participant:** One of the things I feel that my job in the school library has been is to create a safe place to come to. I know how it feels to be on a bus that is being shaken by Whites or how it feels to be spit at as you walk into the school. Because of experiences like these, we're here where we are, we're able to enjoy Martin Luther King's dream because we are all different: Mexican, African, whatever. So when I present things to the kids, whether it's material about being Black or reading about anything, really, I get sad when I see them playing around like it doesn't matter. For Black children and for all children living out there, it does matter. I try, from deep in here I try, to bring what I bring to them from the heart.

**Dr. Dillard:** I think that what strikes me about your comments is that it comes from particular lived experiences. It's not accidental that we do the things we do in classrooms. It comes from particular lived experiences.

**Third Audience Participant:** I am a teacher, a trainer, and an encourager. I've seen so many who have turned off the light, and I want to bring back the lamp. Why is that? I grew up in a Black rural community. Growing up, I knew I was Black, but I didn't have any defining things tell me, "You're Black." I didn't have anything [telling me] that you are nothing to be proud of, that you are nothing, that you are never going to be nothing, but around me it appeared to be a lot of nothingness. People didn't have dreams, didn't have anything to look forward to. Even when I was a little girl, my books were the outlet; something showing me that there was something more. That was my first experience outside of my own reality. So now when I work with children I let them know that there is something more, and that even if your family says "not so," it is so. You have to look outside your reality in order to want something more, and I try to show that, I try to tell them that.

**Dr. Dillard:** I have a story, a biography, to add to yours. It's about an African-American undergraduate student. I share this as a way to frame the discussion of why African identity is so critical to educating American children and so fundamental to multi-cultural education.

In the classes that I teach, I present a creative autobiography in an art form, as do my students, before we start any discussion about somebody else's children or about multi-cultural education. During one class, a woman jumps up; she has a Bible clutched to her chest. After giving thanks and praise to the Creator, the Elders, her parents, she begins to describe her life. "I became an introvert as a child and withdrew into music and books. I got it from the White world, and I got it from the Black world. Around age thirteen I became a drug addict and continued for about twelve years. Then God let me see my five-year-old son seeing me as a drug addict, and I knew I had to change." She then described how she used the energy from these periods of darkness to generate positive experiences for her own children, centered passionately on rich African heritage, culture, and identity. She said, "I have learned not just to tell my kids what to do, but to model it for them. But I also know now that we, as African Americans, need to start reading. We need to start finding out about ourselves. I can't do anything until I know where I have come from. You know, everybody wants to be multi-cultural and unbiased, and I think it's critical that we maintain our identity in any and all settings." For me it's her final sentence that I've carried with me. She said, "You know everybody wants to be multi-cultural (one might also read that as politically correct) and unbiased, and I think it's critical that we maintain our identities in any and all settings."

I feel a deep incongruence between the more mainstream notions of multi-cultural education among my colleagues (both Black and White) and the more critical African-centered pedagogy that many of these same multi-cultural educators say is too radical, too exclusionary, too angry, or too difficult to understand. You see the tension that many of us walk.

With my African-centered scholarship and my personal understanding increased by my work in Ghana, I see myself as an advocate first and foremost for the need of African-centered teaching and curriculum, especially in preparation of K through 12 teachers and teacher advocates. I want to talk about African-centered education in terms of something that cannot be seen as separate from what we do everyday, particularly in the context of working with African-American children.

I lean on Asanti's definition of Afrocentricity to start us out: the belief in the centrality of Africa in post-modern history. It is our mythology, our creative motifs, our ethos (our spirit, if you will), which exemplifies a collective African will. There are three related concepts that are foundational to any discussion about teaching African-American children. Just three concepts that we've got to think about in terms of these babies that are sitting in front of us everyday.

**First**, they come from an ethos or a worldview that is African, and whether we recognize it or not, it is still African. Donna Richard said, "It refers in part to the emotional substance of a cultural group and their collective emotional tone." The fact that a people's historical circumstances are shared over a long period of time makes them one, and their oneness creates a commonness of spirit. So the idea that we as a people collectively lived together for a long time in Africa, collectively came through the middle passage, collectively lived together in the context of slave quarters and other degradations, and then collectively still often live in communities together, suggests that there's something that our spirits might hold in common.

This ethos is also very much a spiritual ethos. We may not want to think about spirituality because we tend to equate that with religion, but it is something that is fundamental to the way in which African people see the world. That spirituality is not measured as we go to a Baptist Church, a Methodist Church, or a Muslim Temple. Spirituality is the truth at the core of our being, the consciously active needs by which we recognize, activate, and live the consistent truth of who we are. Given the structure of our schooling today,

African expression in [a spiritual] way is often in direct conflict with the way we manage our secular schools.

**The second** piece that is critical to us as African people is the notion of community. I think community has a very different meaning for African people. According to Joy James, this idea of community from an African world view is not bound by time or physical limits in the same kind of way that we tend to think about community: classroom community, school community. African people belong to the African community even when we're not residing in predominantly African-American places. Belonging is not determined by physical proximity. You determine not whether you belong to the community, but you [determine] the nature, relationship, and meaning that belonging holds for you. It is difficult to get out of the Black community; we carry it with us in our bodies. I don't care where you go, who you are, whether you're Oprah with a bazillion dollars or you are someone who has none. Understanding that notion of community, our work as teachers needs to connect the unfamiliar, whether it's language, traditions, or cultural ways of learning within those communities.

**The third** concept in African-centered education is the idea of practice of thought. This idea of thought put into action is central to the community and provides a way for us to understand the ideals of the community. So any notion of goodness has to be judged by whether we are actually doing something, instead of just talking about doing something. So practice on behalf of freedom and creativity for African Americans is not a luxury. You must be doing something, and we must be able to see that action.

I think one of the things we've got to keep in mind is that these children seem to think that Africa is something that existed a long time ago, but it's something that exists today. We've got to figure out ways to hook the everyday experiences for African-American children back to that reality. It seems to create a space for that kind of education; African American children's voices and experiences have got an eclectic African-American experience. That experience has got to be placed at the center, and we as teachers, as Mary Wright Edelman says, are our children's problem. We are our children's problem. Our children come naturally to school ready to learn, loving you, enjoying talking and reading and writing and becoming learned. So if we are thinking about African-American children as the African children they are, we ourselves have to be learners of Africa. It means that you've got extra studies to do. I really believe that all of us, Black or White, are in the process of recovering. Black folks have to learn who we are and our connections to a people and a mighty continent. White folks have to learn who they aren't, in terms of the purveyors of all knowledge and all culture. One of us will not be healed without the other; it is collective work but it is different work that we will be doing.

I want to share with you three lessons that been important to me as I think about what it means to be a learner of Africa and a learner of African-American children.

First of all, if you are a person who believes in the inherent creativity of African people, as I hope you are, you have to have a vision of an education that centers on both children and yourself. Without a vision the people will perish. In these troubled times, times when governments find it easier to go to war than to mediate peaceful solutions, times when the military or prison industrial complexes are the fastest growing industries in an otherwise pitiful economy, times when many of us are too busy trying to connect with others through our palm pilots and cell phones than with our voices or outstretched hands, creating a vision for ourselves and our people should be central to educators. We must embody it and desire a relevant education for African-American children. Martin Luther King, Jr., said that the power of an idea could be measured by the people it touches. This begs the question in my mind, what are your perceptions of and responsibility towards African-American children? What must you be to serve them well? What must you do to make sure that the brilliance of African-American children is not stifled, crushed, ignored, or refused? My daddy used to say, "People who know better, do better." I would encourage you to know better.

The second lesson is actually from a Bob Marley song: "Who feels it, knows it all." Some of you might know the song. Creativity for me is the process of expressing yourself, and one of the most challenging tasks you have as teachers is to insert your true humanity into the teaching experience. I've worked with teachers who know what to do for Black children but feel their hands are tied by bureaucracy, rules of racism, and ignorance of those around them. After years of trying I've learned something that's really fundamental: my work is not to convince White people that I belong anywhere or to remind them that I am not a White person who happens to accidentally be Black. Those issues are between people and their own self-esteem. What I've learned is that our focus must be on loving ourselves, healing ourselves, being ourselves, and opening up places for our children to do the same. I want you all to do something; I want you to point to yourself and don't move your finger. Look around at where people are pointing: we automatically point to the heart. If you feel it there, you also know it. There is no separation between your body, your mind, your heart, your spirit in an African worldview. I urge you to resist anything that doesn't encourage those creative powers that come from there, and I urge you resist anything that doesn't help you to work with your students from here.

The final lesson is borrowed from a Miriam Makeba song titled, "Africa is Where Our Heart Lies." I've been enriched beyond measure in my work going back and forth between the continent and here; the healing is immense, the knowledge is tremendous. As an African person, the affirmation and connections to the motherland have been transformative. So however you can study it, know and remember the roots of Africa. Again, I am not talking just to Black people, because everybody will be healed by the knowledge that is indigenous to this land. For those who love African-American children this is imperative for teaching them. We as African people originate from brilliance, and our brilliance and our light comes from endarkening our understanding of ourselves now. I am not advocating that we shouldn't know our connections to European history or other histories. They are important. But if we aren't grounded in the greatness of Africans, Africans in America, and the Diaspora, at the least we are missing a better part of ourselves and vital knowledge that we need to teach our babies well.

Today I celebrate you and honor you and thank you for your voice, commitment, and untiring work to create a world that doesn't yet exist but is sure to come forth through the dance and the art of your heart. God bless you and thank you for the commitments that you make on behalf of African-American children. Daddy says, "Now you know better, you have to do better." Thank you.

## PART II:

Presentation by **Ms. Tei Street**

Director of Education, City of Columbus, Ohio

*The Three R's Are Not Enough: Rescuing Black Youth Through the Arts*

**Ms. Street:** First of all, I want to thank you for what you do everyday for the young people of Columbus Public Schools. I stand here today because two teachers and an administrator banded together to save my life. I stand here today, as a former juvenile delinquent who no one could reach because no one understood that there was a voice inside me dying to get out.

They asked me for a title for today's talk, and I said, *The Three R's Are Not Enough: Rescuing Black Youth Through the Arts*. That's what happened for me. I had been in the system, and when I say the system, I mean I had been in foster homes and every detention facility across the state of Ohio that you can imagine. When I got to Mifflin High School, I was almost seventeen years old, and I was in ninth grade because I hadn't been in school. When kids have been in the system, they often come to you with deficits of grades, not because they are unintelligent, but because they haven't been in school. When I was moving all around the state, I never had consistency of education. My I.Q. is above average intelligence; they always knew that I was bright. But everywhere I went I wreaked havoc, so today I come back and speak to teachers; that's my penance.

I work with young people across districts in the city of Columbus. I have an opportunity to encounter many young people who are like me, and I try to give them hope. I'll tell you a quick story. I was driving one of my colleagues to the site for *Capacity* (A youth arts program sponsored by the Columbus Association of Performing Arts, CAPA). Do any of you know about the art program *Capacity*? They serve young people that no one wants to serve, the Bloods from over on the south side of Columbus. So as we are pulling by *Capacity*, there are four young men out there, and they're doing a little free styling. I pull over and roll down my window and say, "Whatcha'all doing?"

"Man, we waiting on Mr. Powell. Man, he had this little thing with these little kids over there with the west side."

"Well, in the mean time what are y'all doing?"

"Man, we just doing a little free flow."

I said, "You know I work with Mr. Powell. Did you get to hear the demo CD he did for these little kids singing? Those are my kids, and that's where he is right now. I paid for that."

"Oh man, for real?"

I said, "Do me a favor, spin something for me, but it's got to be clean 'cause I'm old."

And the one boy said, "Man, you better go first then." So they started to spin something, they did some freestylin', each one took a turn on the beats, and we're sitting in the car, getting a concert. I felt guilty cause I was getting a free concert.

He was like, "Who are you?"

I said, "The director of education for the Mayor."

"Hey, you cool like that?"

So I showed him my card, and I said, "What do you do when you're not doing this?"

He said, "For real? I sell drugs." I knew who he was. He had his red bandana on. I knew exactly who those young men were, but I'm not afraid of our kids because I remember when people were afraid of me. I know that there is a voice inside of them dying to get out, so I said to him, "If I got you a job and made sure you all had studio time over here at *Capacity*, would you (I ain't saying give up your colors yet, we can work on that) but would you give up the drug dealing?"

"Man, ain't nobody gonna give me a job."

I said, "What if I hired you in my office?" I gave him my card and I told the Mayor last night, "I'm hiring this little drug dealing boy, okay? He's coming into my office to work after school because I want to invest in the arts because I know what it does for kids like me."

When I got to Mifflin as a ninth grader, they walked around the city like, "Hey. We Mifflin." We had the number one drama school and the very first Thespian Troupe. We won OTA (Ohio Theatre Alliance competition) every year. Almost everyone who came out of that school got scholarships in theater. I was there because my foster parents said that I could live with them, but if I got kicked out of school, I was gone. I'd been like that forever; I didn't know how to be in school.

I end up in an English class with a Black woman named Emery Hill who changed the course of my life. She was the first person I've ever been afraid of. You understand, I hit a male teacher in middle school and knocked him out in Yorktown. I was bad, okay? I could fight, but I walked into this woman's class, and she was bad. Everybody in the school feared her, dreaded her. I was in her ninth grade, almost seventeen, and never going to graduate. I'm just doing time so that I can turn eighteen and drop out of school; that was my game plan. I take the first exam, which most people fail, and I get 100%. She calls me to her office. "Did you cheat?" I was offended and said no, and she had me take the test again. Gave me a test again 'cause I was a little arrogant. Took the test and got another 100. She said, "We got work to do. Why are you so bad when you are so bright?"

I'm like, "No one knows what I need."

"So what do you need?"

"I need something other than Math and Reading. I can do that. I'm bored; I hate school."

She introduced me to a woman named Sally Kriska, who became part of the reason why I'm here today. She said, "Come try out for this play." Can ya'all tell I made the play? I got the lead in a play, and what I loved about Sally was she had a diverse troupe of kids, and she was one of the very first people who would do cross casting. She would cast Black kids in roles that weren't really written for Black folks. She would cast Black people and White people as brothers and sisters in plays, and you would walk away believing it. We were like, "Wow! They're good; they really are sisters."

She cast me in *Arsenic and Old Lace* as one of the two sisters, and my sister was a White girl. We had a Black nephew and a White nephew, and all of a sudden something in me opened up. They used art to reel me in; I fell in love with the theater. They said if I got suspended, I couldn't be in the play. That was the hook for me. I found myself trying harder and harder to get control of my behavior, working harder in History, harder in Algebra, harder in English, harder in all the other subjects that I couldn't care less about.

Then I found myself working with a woman named Mary Daniels in the music department, singing. I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket if my life depended on it but she didn't care. She put me in the Choir. I got no rhythm but I was like, "I'm bad. I can sing

and act in art school." People in the arts were like athletes; you were as popular as the jocks. People walked around like, "Ah, man. You're a thespian? Man, how do I get on?" This was when I started to see myself in a different light. It was in drama that I started to write; it was in drama that I started to speak. Those teachers saved my life.

When I went to Ohio State, I went on a theater scholarship, one of the very few Black people who ever got into Ohio State on anything other than a minority scholarship. I said, "You may never cast me, but it won't be because I'm not good: it will be because you got issues." And sure enough they did have issues; they had graduate students who were Black that they never cast, but it didn't deter me from getting two degrees from OSU, and they paid me for it.

When I was at OSU, I used the arts effectively. What kind of jobs did you have when you were in college? Talk to me.

**Audience Participant:** Cleaning offices.

**Ms. Street:** How much did you make an hour?

**Audience Participant:** \$7.50.

**Ms. Street:** Other people?

**Second Participant:** I did day care.

**Third Participant:** Made sandwiches.

**Fourth Participant:** Silverman's Men's Store; I sold clothes.

**Ms. Street:** You all know how much I made when I was at Ohio State working? I made forty dollars an hour. I was the chief facilitator for a women's organization. And all I used were my public speaking skills and my drama. "You know you're not getting cast," they said. "Why don't you come over to the women's education program?" And that's how they found me. I couldn't have cared less at that time about a women's movement.

"What do you all do?"

"Well, we go around to all fraternities, all the intro level classes doing education seminars. Don't know what you're supposed to say? We'll train you."

"I'm not interested. I ain't going up there."

"Tei, it's forty dollars an hour."

"Whoop. Where is my train?"

And what I ended up doing as passion work, I started out doing for the money. I was a student with one cause, forty dollars an hour. I did three or four gigs a week and made what my friends were making working almost full time. I said I could train; I started using my drama. I took a difficult topic that was hard for people to talk about. I added some humor, I used some dramatics, I did role-playing workshops. I brought it to life, and I didn't beat up on men. So I went in and I tried very diligently to give kids a message, and it eventually became passion work. I used the arts in public speaking to make a good living through college.

Today I do motivational speaking; I travel across the country. I travel the country talking to kids about being drug free. Can you imagine what I get to say to these kids about making positive choices, about how you turn your life around? My book talks about that. It's about what the arts did to intervene in my life to give me the voice that was missing. I'm not ashamed of who I am. I built a great life. I'm not ashamed of my past. What I want young people to know is to engage in the things that matter to you, the things that you feel have worth from the inside.

My first day on the job (as Director of Education for the Mayor of Columbus), we went to see a class. I was taken aback: poor Black kids, poor White kids, all coming from the same environment, all with the same kind of attitudes. There was the most beautiful, cute little Black boy who walked up to me and said, "Greetings, Miss Tei. Welcome to our class. May I offer you a seat?" Well, sure. They said they had something they'd like to show me. They sang a song for me. They said, "This is how we tell you what we're about." They start to sing that song from *Sister Act 2*, "You want to be somebody, you want to go somewhere..." They're moving, they're dancing, and they are singing the song.

I turn to the director, and she said, "My kids were struggling with phonics; we do it to music. All of these kids have art."

One of the boys said, "I can break dance to the multiplication rap." He fell on the floor, y'all, and did this break dance and got up and finished the multiplication rap. His mother

came to me and said, "I love this program because my son was going to fail fourth grade because he could not get multiplication. He learns one more set of multiplication, and then he gets to learn two more moves to the break dance." Guess what? He passed math.

That's what happens when you integrate, and I'm not talking about just in music and drama. Kids ought to have art integrated across the curriculum. What would happen if kids understood that a sonnet is nothing more than a rap without the beat? What would happen if all of a sudden Shakespeare came alive on the stage for Black kids? What would happen if all of a sudden it wasn't a taboo to tap your foot doing a math test cause you're listening on your headset to something that makes your mind click.

We had a reunion of all my classmates (of Mifflin High School) who were in drama and music together. We talked about how it saved our lives because it was the only thing that made us want to be in school. I think that we should have art all year in the curriculum. My son's favorite day is Monday, because he has gym, music, and art on Monday. Every Monday he wakes up going, "You know what day it is? It's Monday!" I know that just like it (art) was life affirming and life saving for me, it can be for him, too.

Look at the charter schools that have popped up in Columbus. Scholar Arts is the number one charter school in terms of popularity in Columbus. There's a waiting list for Fort Hayes (Metropolitan Educational Center, an arts-centered high school) of 497. What does that tell you? That there's a need. Fort Hayes' list is a mile long - kids have been trying to get in since they were freshmen and they're seniors now. Parents are telling me that arts matter in children's lives. They are telling the district that. If we're going to save our kids, then we need to go back to our stories. There are stories inside of them, too, just waiting to get out.

Every day when I get up I look at my son and listen to my kids, I remember that they are the reason for my work and your work. I don't get caught up in the bureaucracy; I don't want to do politics. All I want to do is advocate for children. If I can't do that in this job, I don't want this job. I want to do advocacy and policy that make children's lives better, and I want to tell you that what you do matters. When people are asked to name who has impacted their lives, they always say their mamas, their grandmamma, and then they say their teacher; they name that teacher who made a difference in their lives. Every single time. What you do matters every day to children.

The Institute for Education and the Arts aims to broaden the awareness, understanding, and support for teaching through and about the arts to help all children in grades K-12 engage effectively in their learning and to improve achievement in all core subjects.

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