

REFLECTIONS

Gillian Maimon

Summer is a merciful time of reflection and restoration for a teacher. Much of the meaning of what takes place over the course of a year is imperceptible until the backward glance of summer. In my seventeenth summer as a teacher in the School District of Philadelphia, my annual retrospective is colored by what looms for all of us in Philadelphia. While Torch Lytle's call for unified action to wrest control of our schools from the elites who make policy decisions is absolutely imperative, I cannot help but wonder about my place in this social movement. My most meaningful work is done at a very local level, in one small room at one small school. That combination can be an invitation to invisibility. As I look back over the past year, I want to see ways that my small-scale work can have public resonance.

One of the highlights of this year was a school-wide art project that I helped to plan. The experience stands out in part for its rarity, given how the arts have all but disappeared in so many schools. More crucially, the project illuminated for me the connection between children's work and public advocacy. In partnership with Spiral-Q Puppet Theater, we centered our work upon the Terracotta Army, a massive collection of terracotta sculptures created in the 3rd Century BC depicting the armies of Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China. The figures were intended to protect the emperor in his afterlife and stand as monuments to his great power. We perceived the sculptures to be a provocative statement about the interrelationship between art and power. This idea formed the frame for a ten-week project undertaken with students in grades kindergarten through fourth-grade.

All of the children worked together to create their own "art army," huge puppets that represented powers they wished to protect. Watching my own first graders create art that reflected what mattered to them—ideas like family, the outdoors, and books—I was struck by the depth and meticulousness of what they made. My student D., for example, depicted a campfire in painstaking detail, cutting layer after layer of fabric in shades of orange and red. It took her hours to complete what amounted to a very minute piece of a larger work. D.'s artistry is emblematic of what I love most about classrooms: These are places of small and particular action, where something is always being made. My primary role is correspondingly discreet. I am the one who notices and describes these tiny triumphs.

Altogether, we created sixty warriors. These puppets became the centerpieces of a parade and performance designed to engage the community in advocating for our schools. We marched for blocks and blocks with our puppets through the neighborhood, chanting and holding signs urging support for public education. In the weeks that followed, the action was reprised on a smaller scale by groups of students who brought the puppets to city council chambers and to School District headquarters. As one who values the day-to-day particulars of a classroom, public demonstration can feel a bit disingenuous. I cherish this memory in part because of the way that the public aspect grew so organically from meaningful work at the local level. It is powerful affirmation that small-scale work can have public resonance.

But the truth of the project, particularly the enduring public component of it, is that it diverged considerably from my typical style. For years, I have worked with children to create art hallmarked by intensive preparation followed by brief performance. Among the many productions we wrote and performed over the years, are an opera about silkworms, an exhibition of Diego Rivera paintings that came to life, and a presidential candidates' debate moderated by ghosts of ancient African leaders. These are the projects that match my aesthetic, made things that are as carefully crafted as they are fleeting.

I think of a classroom, too, as a work of ephemeral art. All year we build our knowledge of each other, our rituals, our reference points, our shared recognition of changes, until one day in mid-June when the creation ceases to be. That is not to say that I cannot imagine future successes for my students. I simply recognize that the particular way we were successful together is bounded by space and time and facilitated by interactions of specific and diverse personalities. My student, J., communicated a *simpatico* sense of the temporal beauty of the classroom in one of the last pieces she wrote this year:

It will not be the same soon. I like how we cooperate...The class in second grade hopefully will have some of us, but there might be no cooperation.

J's notion, "It will not be the same soon" undergirds the work of teaching. What I make I must remake, again and again, year after year. That I am continually beginning again is, no doubt, a challenge for sustaining activism. But J. reminds me, too, that

ideas can endure. For her, cooperation has become a standard. And perhaps that is the best sort of advocacy I can hope for from myself, to affirm for a child a value that has ongoing resonance. No doubt cooperation is a quality that would serve well all of us who believe in the Philadelphia Public Schools. And while some voices might be less public than others, the discourse of classrooms—what children and teachers create—is at the heart of what we must advocate for.

Gillian Maimon has been a teacher in the Philadelphia public schools since 1996, where she has taught first, second, and third grades. Maimon is interested in exploring ways that particular stories from any classroom serve to interrupt the reductive impact of prescriptive curricula. She writes regularly about her experiences with children, both to enrich her teaching and to inform others who work outside of the classroom. Since 2001, Maimon has taught pre-service teachers at the University of Pennsylvania, opening the doors of her elementary classroom as a site for fieldwork to all of her university students. She is an active member of the Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative (PTLC), a practitioner inquiry group that has met every week since 1978. Maimon’s involvement with PTLC, centered on close observation and description of children’s work as well as her own work, has profoundly shaped her classroom practice.

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