

# We're All Art Teachers

*Don't try to quantify its worth*

by ALICIA ARMAN

## **"YOU CAN'T PLAY MUSIC ON A PIECE OF PAPER."**

Those were the first words a little boy I'll call Michael said to me when he walked in the doors of summer theater camp. I was 18, just months away from starting my first year at Berkeley. I was ready to do my part in shaping the young artists of my hometown as a drama teacher (in training) at one of the myriad theater camps in the area. I'd done this before and knew what to expect: kids are kids, I thought, and these kids would be like all the others—bouncy, bubbly, full of life, and totally normal. I wasn't expecting anyone to yell, "You can't play music on a piece of paper." I wasn't expecting Michael.

It turns out Michael was quoting *SpongeBob SquarePants*, something he would do a lot during our month together. This nine-year-old boy had severe autism and spoke only in quotes from movies and television. His mother had enrolled him in theater camp to help him come out of his shell and learn to socialize with other kids. Michael was behind academically, appeared half his age emotionally, and was prone to temper tantrums. When his mother handed me his Individual Education Plan, I wanted to cry.

The first week I asked myself, "What's wrong with this boy's mother for bringing him here?" The more I got to know him, the more I wondered, "What is wrong with our program that we can't make room for him?" Michael wanted to be there. He wanted to be with other kids; he wanted to speak; he wanted to be seen as a full human being.

Michael didn't end up onstage, but backstage. He discovered his love for stage lights early in the summer and sat next to our burly technical director, pushing buttons and turning lights on and off, as integral to the process as if he were the lead. Michael found a way to speak to us, and we had to listen. It made me think once again about why Michael's mother had enrolled him in theater camp: she wanted him to participate in a conversation on his own terms and to be heard.

The rhetoric of "college and career ready," for good or

ill, has taken over our educational moment. Education is defined as preparation, its purpose tied to an abstract future time. This implies (if taken most sinisterly) that if a child doesn't end up in college or something we consider a career right away, the whole endeavor was pointless. We don't talk much about "education for education's sake" anymore. In an increasingly competitive world, this may be the way to go. This mind-set, however, leaves little room for activities that are educationally, but not measurably, valuable.

As arts educators, we constantly have to defend what we do. Art education must earn its place in mainstream classrooms. We have to quantify the value of our discipline through other, more "worthy" goals. People put their kids in theater camp so they can learn how to speak in front of people, enroll them in music classes in response to studies linking music literacy to math scores, and in painting classes to hone their fine-motor skills. But what art can do is so much more than that. Arts education—drama, music, and visual media—offers the most effective vehicles we have to deliver one of the oldest and most central purposes of education: to create citizens who know how to raise their voices in conversation with the world around them, whatever (and in whichever form) that conversation might be. We're all arts

teachers in the sense that we all help children to find their voices and discover who they are.

Education is a gift we give to our children. We can wrap it up as math, science, reading, or art, but the important thing isn't what we give them. It's what they do with it. Arts education enables children to develop into who they really are; it's the key that opens kids' minds and makes the rest of the stuff possible. Michael's *SpongeBob* quip was more prophetic than he knew: you can't play music on a piece of paper, and you can't describe the purpose of education on one either.

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