

The Medieval Festival

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During these cold days of winter sixth grade teachers everywhere are beginning to put together a celebration that has become a cornerstone of the curriculum, the Medieval Festival. It has evolved quite a bit over the years; it didn't even exist when my first two classes came through sixth grade. Those classes had a rousing experience of Medieval Games but no knighting ceremony. Happily, for my next group, a few years before they would be sixth graders a colleague brought a new model for a more meaningful festival to our school that a friend had developed for her school, and so a new tradition began.

The festival had elements that were always the same for each sixth grade, but there was also the possibility for individual teachers to craft something especially meaningful for their classes. This individuality could occur because no siblings were invited to attend, thereby leaving a mantle of mystery around the proceedings and, also, leaving the teachers of younger grades some freedom in their planning.

Having created the festival for three classes and having brought the idea to many sixth-grade intensives during summer trainings, I would like to encourage teachers to use the festival to connect with the business math block and a variety of service projects. One of the reasons we present business math to twelve-year-olds is that their capacity to learn the math is enhanced by their open-heart forces - they can truly see the importance of using money to foster positive changes in the world, and they are incredibly generous with their resources. While visiting a bank with two of my classes, we all were shown the vault where money was kept. Back in our classroom the students had a lively conversation about the idea of amassing money and keeping it out of circulation. Twelve-year-olds discussing the question of 'how much money is enough' for a person to be happy and live a comfortable life is quite inspiring. It can be a precursor to conversations in high school and beyond between people who want to be actively engaged in creating a more just society.

I'd like to share some ideas that were important for all the groups. Sixth grade starts with a new excitement that come from being in the middle school. The students look forward to some changes in the specialty program, sports teams they can now join, and new areas of study in math and science. My students also began working on individual pieces of paper that would be bound into a main lesson book at the that end of the year, a change that brought a much greater independence in relation to their work. One of the most anticipated changes had to do with class fundraising; this was the year the class could begin to come up with ways to raise funds for their field trips. It also provided a perfect way to connect their study of business math to the real world. It is quite typical for middle school classes to donate a percentage of their fundraising money to their school, and invariably there are children who question why that is necessary. That question in my own classes was so rewarding as the group discussed the reasons why that might be. Through a recognition of the school community as their biggest

financial supporter, coupled with a gratitude towards the school for supporting their fundraising activities, the class transformed their annoyance at sharing their hard-earned funds to one of gratitude that they were allowed to raise money in the school. Many times my students decided to offer a higher percentage to the school or offered to do jobs in the yard or the building in exchange for being able to use the resources of the school. These conversations around class fundraising combined perfectly with our preparation for the knighting ceremony. Using historical sources I wrote on the board many descriptions of knightly behavior that were part of oaths taken during knighting ceremonies. We discussed each quality, first looking at how it might have been acted upon during Medieval times and then seeing if it was something the students found meaningful for their lives. In this way the class came up with seven qualities they thought were important to strive towards. Acting with courage, compassion, thoughtfulness, and intention were a few of the qualities they chose to work on.

Our festival was in May, and at the beginning of January we started a three-fold service program. The first part required that each student begin by writing me a letter stating the service they were going to offer in their communities. Their parents had to approve their choices because, in many cases, they provided transportation and support. Students did everything from collecting food regularly for the food bank to working at a donkey rescue center. They had to complete at least twelve hours of service before the ceremony, and once a week they wrote an update of their experiences to hand in as homework. We also had a regular check in during an extra main class where the students could share their experiences, including the challenges they faced while doing this work. For most, it was the first time they interacted with adults in the greater community, and I was always impressed with their honesty and depth as they spoke about their experiences.

The second aspect of the service program had to do with working individually in their homes. They had to take on a new chore and try to use their commitment to knightly behaviors to transform a grouchy or less-than-positive attitude they had previously brought to interactions with family members. Parents, especially, loved this and regularly reported how their child was doing laundry or getting up in the morning as a much more cheerful person! We also regularly checked in about this, which helped to keep children on task and enthusiastic.

The third part of the program was a service the class did together. A number of my classes worked in nursing homes once a week. It was challenging, but very rewarding, and some of the students continued that service on into seventh and even eighth grade. One of my classes decided to clean trash off the main street of their town once a month and that job also continued into the next grade. An important aspect of this service is the connection that is fostered between the students and the larger community.

About a month before the ceremony, the students would be asked to write a few sentences about everyone else in the class, sharing some positive qualities and something they wished their classmate could change about themselves. They were remarkably consistent and thoughtful, and I put the positive qualities together into a narrative which I would then read during the ceremony. The other qualities I shared in a private, much anticipated and

appreciated conversation with each student. I gave the narratives that would be read aloud during the ceremony to a community member who copied them out in calligraphy and decorated the pages.

With one class, we went on a service field trip two weeks before the ceremony, canoeing down a local river, cleaning the waterway, and camping on the riverbank. Each evening we gathered around the fire and in the glow of firelight the students shared how they felt they were doing as they tried to incorporate the knightly qualities into their lives. The conversations were very meaningful because the students were so honest. For a moment, protected by the darkness and glowing fire, the students shared glimpses of their best selves and we all truly felt the striving of the others. The other adults and I agreed that we saw each child becoming more conscious of their interactions on the trip, and everyone took a step into a new maturity.

The ceremony itself was always a cooperative effort by many teachers. We decorated the church where it would be held. The music teacher prepared the songs they would sing and play on their instruments. The wood shop teacher spent months helping students make their own swords, and in handwork the students had sewn silk bags to hold the old-fashioned keys their parents gave to represent their key into the future. In art classes each student designed a family crest and created a beautiful poster using gilded pencils, pens, and paints. A Lord and Lady were chosen to call each child up to be knighted; a script was followed, with the royals reciting their part and the student kneeling while answering their questions. Many of my students over the years shared that they were much more nervous coming up to be knighted than they were during class plays. One child explained that during a play they played being someone else, but during the ceremony they had to be themselves. Of course, that is exactly what the ceremony does; it allows the student to glimpse who they are and who they may become.

A special feast prepared by the parents was enjoyed the next day, and sometime in the next few weeks the students joined other Waldorf classes for the lively and raucous Medieval games. It was a wonderful complement to the seriousness of the ceremony. The students remained sixth graders after the ceremony; they remained twelve-year-olds still experiencing all the joys and challenges of that age, but the five month focus on the qualities they wanted to strive for added a deeper understanding and allowed them to glimpse the people they might become in the future. As middle school teachers, what more could we wish for.