



BUILDING  
COLLECTIVE  
RESILIENCE

# Voices of Children Year 1

Theatre & Performing Arts for Young Audiences:  
Building Collective Resilience (TPAYABCR)

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## Summary

The following report is written by the local Swedish project coordinator with feedback from *ASSITEJ International*. It describes how 27 local students (page 7) saw three performances during the *ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering 2022 & Bibu Biennial* (page 6) and engaged in a facilitated workshop with their teacher (chapter 3). This workshop significantly deepened their engagement with the performances and provided an opportunity to listen to their thoughts and reflections about the performances based on their own personal experiences.

The report reflects on the choice of performances, the work process itself (including pre- and post- assessments, methods, and experiences), the important value of facilitated workshops, and future thoughts for continued programmes of work that involve taking groups of children to performances.

The report also displays images of the workshops and a selection of the visual testimonials created by the children.

The project had originally been designed such that the children's thoughts would be shared during the festival with other (adult) delegates. However, since the festival lasted only six days, this proved difficult - especially when working with post- performance creative activities and allowing the children sufficient time for reflection.

The 'TPAYABCR' project will, however, feed the voices of the children into the conversations of professional artists by (1) presenting this programme in November 2023 at *ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering 2023*, (2) circulating this present report among members of *ASSITEJ International*, the Executive Committee, and staff, and (3) through the likely presentation of the programme at one of the exchange study days held by Swedish performing arts organisations for children and young people in the next academic school year.

Being the first (pilot) year of "Voices of Children", the recommendations and learnings (chapter 4) will also form an important basis for year two of the project.

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# This Is What I Saw

Performing Arts Experiences in School as an Important Part of Self-Development



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# 1. Introduction by the Author

This report is an account of how a year three class at Slottsvångs School in Helsingborg, Sweden, worked before as well as after, seeing three different performances during the ASSITEJ Artistic Gathering and Bibu Performing Arts Biennial in the spring of 2022. The author of this report is myself, an elementary teacher at Slottsvångs School. I hold more than 20 years of work experience, within many educational areas, as well as working within the aesthetic learning processes of students of varying ages.

Thank you to the students who participated in this project and provided a basis for this study. A special thank you to Irene Grahn, Performing Arts Program Producer and Drama Educator, who has been my sounding board during the course of this project. Another special thank you to Sue Giles, President of the International ASSITEJ, and Niklas Borefors, CEO & Operations Manager of Bibu AB, for your unwavering trust in this pilot project.

## 2. Pilot Project: "This Is What I Saw"

### 2.1 Background

In April of 2022, I was contacted by Irene Grahn who works for Bibu Performing Arts biennial and was asked if I would like to participate in a pilot project initiated by Sue Giles, whereby my students and I would receive the opportunity to see three performances during the biennial held in Helsingborg, May 17<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

After the performances, we would do follow-up work at school to scaffold the students' experiences. There were no given requirements as to the form for students' reflections and the choice of performances was unrestricted. At the time of the performances, the students had just completed their Swedish National tests in Swedish, Swedish as a Second Language and Mathematics. This time-period was also close to holidays in connection with end of the academic year and the impending graduation celebrations.

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## 2.2 Purpose

The overall aim of the pilot project was to investigate children's honest opinions on performing arts and to allow the students to reflect and be creative based on their own experiences of the arts performances.

## 2.3 Choice of Performances

There was a large range of performances offered by Bibu and due to time constraints; the students were not involved in the decision-making. As their teacher, I chose the following performances:

*Mantis and the Bee* by Jungle Theatre Company – Languages: English and Khoikhoi. The performance included song, dance, music, puppetry, and a creation story.

Motivation: Most of my students have over several years worked with the creation of stories where we have used, amongst other things, dance, song, and puppets. The idea was to create a feeling of recognition while at the same time it would be completely new due to the different rhythms and language of another culture. Questions to discuss before and after the performance focused on the concepts of creation myths and cultures. What is a creation myth? What is meant by *different cultures*?

*Våra viktigaste vuxna* (translation – *Our most important adults*) by Angereds Theatre Company – Language: Swedish. Theatre performance. Children's relationships with, and thoughts of, adults within their closest circles.

Motivation: A starting point for a discussion regarding children's thoughts about the adults around them.

*Häxor* (translation – *The Witches*) by Region Theatre Väst – Language: non-verbal apart from the sounds made by the witches. Dance performance.

Motivation: I have not earlier attended a pure dance performance with my students, and I was curious to see how it would be received as well as their reactions. The idea of witches is something that can be further explored.

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## 2.4 Description of the Year Group

The class consisted of 27 students, 17 girls and 10 boys all around the age of nine years. 25 students had another ethnic background and five of these students were born in Sweden. Two students did not speak any Swedish.

One student followed the *Swedish National Special School Curriculum (GrSär)*, and one student had an autism diagnosis.

One mentor/class teacher and one assistant.

Approximately half of the students had been with us since preschool, that is to say, the students had been in the same group for four years.

A curious and lively class with many strong personalities!

# 3. To be Pedagogical and to Work Pedagogically About and With Art

## 3.1 Job Description

In the world of schools today, the focus lies on making sure to cover all the criteria in the curriculum and to assess the students work, so you may miss the spontaneous opportunities for dialogues/discussions and creativity in all its forms. It is easy to forget that this work and learning processes are also embedded in our curriculum and they are just as important as everything else.

Some excerpts from the Swedish Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class, and school-age educare (Lgr22) that support this are:

### 1. Fundamental values and tasks of the school

Understanding and compassion for others

*“Awareness of one’s own cultural origins and sharing in a common cultural heritage provides a secure identity which it is important to develop, together*

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*with the ability to understand and empathise with the values and conditions of others. The school is a social and cultural meeting place with both the opportunity and the responsibility to strengthen this ability among all who work there.” (p. 5)*

### Tasks of the school

*“Language, learning, and the development of a personal identity are all closely related. By providing a wealth of opportunities for discussion, reading and writing, all pupils should be able to develop their ability to communicate and thus enhance confidence in their own language abilities. Creative and investigative activities and play are essential components of active learning.” (p. 7)*

*“The school should stimulate pupils’ creativity, curiosity, and self-confidence, as well as their desire to translate ideas into action and solve problems. Pupils should have the opportunity to take initiatives and assume responsibility, and to develop their ability to work both independently and together with others.” (p. 8)*

*“The school should stimulate each pupil towards self-development and personal growth. It should focus not only on intellectual but also practical, sensual, and aesthetic aspects.” (p. 9)*

### 5.18 Swedish 5.19 Swedish as a second language

*“Language is the primary tool human beings use for thinking, communicating, and learning. Through language people develop their identity, express their emotions and thoughts, and understand how others feel and think. Rich and varied language is important in being able to understand and function in a society where different cultures, outlooks on life, generations and language all interact.” (p. 262 & 274)*

*“When encountering different types of texts, performing arts and other aesthetic narratives, pupils should be given the preconditions to develop their language, their own identity and their understanding of the surrounding world.” (p. 262 & 274)*

When I was asked to attend three performances with my students, I did not hesitate for a minute. Of course, we should grab this opportunity when presented. Later, when it dawned on me that we would also need to spend more time on pre – and post – activities, a question came to mind: How would we have time to do all this?

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We had, as previously stated, just completed all the national tests. Our initial plan was to go through the results of the tests and practice parts that the students did not fully master as well as work on finishing other subject-specific tasks. We only had ten school days left before the end of the academic year, when all our long-term collaborations needed to be completed. Despite the time constraints, I decided to let my students participate in this project, as I know from experience that performing arts experiences give students so much more than simply an enjoyable and/or exciting time outside of the school walls.

The first thing I did was to purchase a journal for each of the students. These journals were thought to be used as logbooks where the students could write, draw, and paint their experiences after each performance (see *Figure 1*). Then it was time to see the first performance.

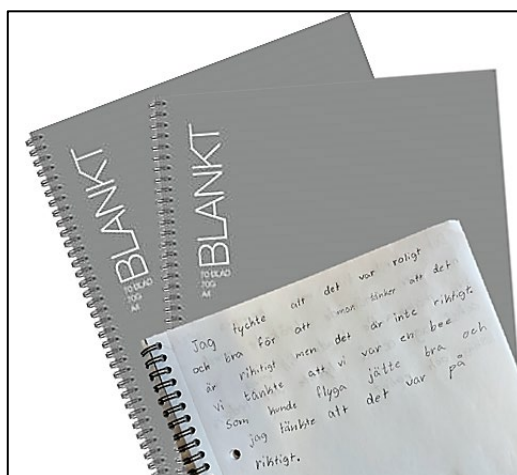


Figure 1 - Journal with blank pages.

### 3.2 Framework and Work Done in Connection to Performances

The performances were booked during the performing arts festival week, one on a Wednesday and two on the Friday of the same week.

The Wednesday show, *Mantis and the Bee*, was cancelled, as some of the actors from South Africa did not receive their travel permits. Instead, we

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watched a recorded version on YouTube in our classroom. Prior to the viewing, we spoke about the idea of a creation myth in order to gain an understanding of what the show would be about. We got into discussions about different cultures' creation myths and finally into Norse mythology which led us to completing an Old Norse unit.

After the viewing the movie, each student spoke about their experience and what thoughts came to mind. This was recorded as voice memos, which, along with their thoughts were summarized using a "Word cloud" generator (see *Figure 2*). The students also wrote and drew their reflections in their journals (see *Figure 3*).



Figure 2 - Word Cloud-image of students' reflections.



Figure 3 - Journal reflections.

As compensation for not being able to see the performance live, we were invited to a workshop at the Helsingborg Theatre, in the Little theatre salon. For just over an hour, the students had the opportunity to experience and process the story



by portraying different characters, depicting parts and events of the story in dance and speech, both in English and Khoikhoi (see *Figure 4*).



*Figure 4. Students see the performance Mantis and the Bee in the classroom and a day later received the opportunity to experience the whole show through drama and dance.*

During the rest of the week, the afternoon sessions were dedicated to working on with the performance. Students were grouped and they painted large depictions based on their reflections/drawings from their journals. These large depictions were later used to inspire creation of new stories that were written down and read aloud (see *Figure 5*).



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Figure 5. Group artwork after the performance of Mantis and the Bee.

One group even created a simple installation/sculpture (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Sculpture/installation – Fire, water, mantis, and bee.



On the Friday, we had two shows booked in. One in the morning and one in the afternoon. The morning performance was *Våra viktigaste vuxna* (translation – *Our most important adults*). We did not do any work before the show but did all the more after the show. The show was long, lasting 90 minutes, but our experience of it was not so long as so many things were happening on stage all the time. The students were very focused; some were also given the possibility to participate on stage towards the end of the performance. When the performance itself was over, the audience was invited to take a tour of the stage, to visit all the “rooms” that had been build. Afterwards, we were divided into smaller groups and were given the opportunity to talk about what we had experienced, to capture thoughts and feelings that were evoked as well as to ask questions (see *Figure 7*).



*Figure 7. Theatre performance of “Our most important adults” invited student’s time to sit down with the actors and ask questions about the performance.*



The Friday afternoon performance, *The Witches*, was after the school day ended but the students chose to remain at school to see the performance and were later compensated with other school days ending earlier.

*The Witches* was a pure dance performance that captivated the students throughout the whole show. With their movements on stage, the use of light and sound, the students were swept away and greatly moved. After the performance, we had the opportunity to talk to the actors and meet the team behind *The Witches* (see *Figure 8*). These opportunities, to be able to speak to someone who has awakened something within you, was immense. After this, we returned to school and ended the week by wishing each other a lovely weekend.

Post-performance activities would have to wait until the following week.



*Figure 8. The students were very curious about the witches and excited to tell them that they were a little afraid.*

The following week was only a three-day week. On Monday, we refreshed our memory by talking about what we had seen in the previous week. We created a

shared Venn diagram to make comparisons and clarify similarities and differences between the three different performances (see Figure 9).

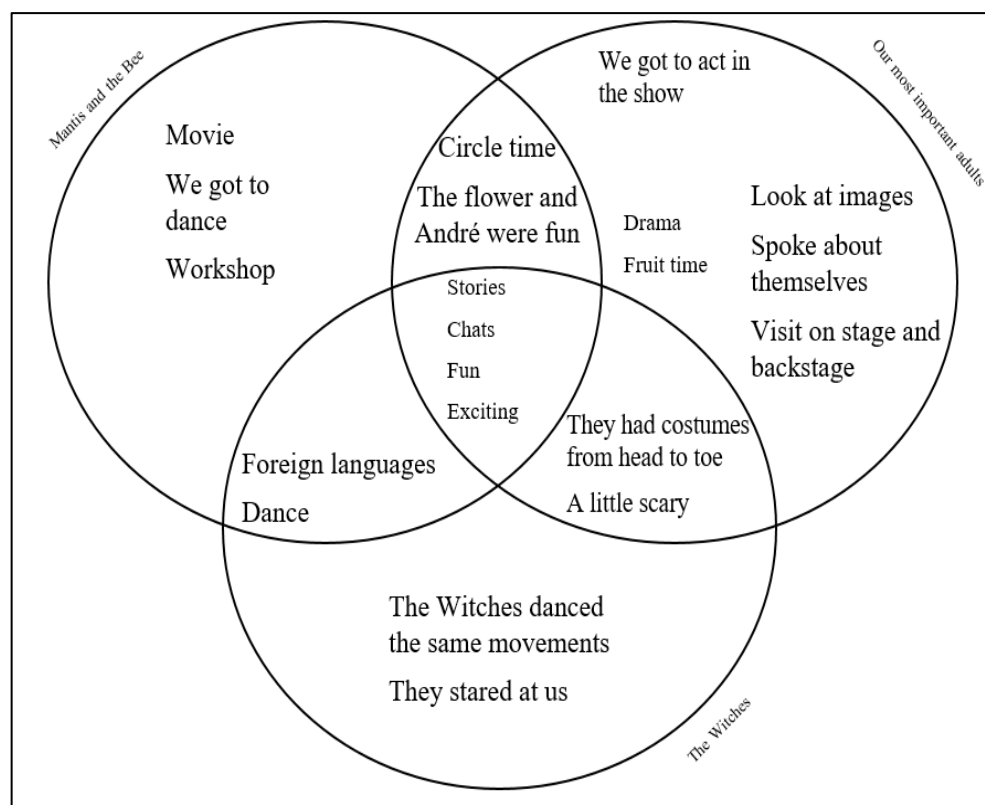


Figure 9. Venn-diagram – a simple performance analysis.

### 3.3 Working Methods During the Project

#### 3.3.1 Preparatory Work – Dialogue, Art/Image, and Movie Screening

Prior to the performances *Mantis and the Bee* and *The Witches* we had done some preparatory work in the form of conversations, image, and movie screenings. Before the first mentioned performance, I had spoken about and showed a book with stories about creation myths from all over the world. I emphasized the Norse creation story because we had just learnt about the Viking Age, so it was familiar to the students. We then watched a film about the Vikings' creation myth.





Before *The Witches* performance, we spoke about what a witch is/was. We got into discussions about the witches that fly to *Blåkulla* (translation – *Blue Hill*) during Easter (Swedish Folklore) and I spoke a little about the witch trials that raged for several hundred years in Sweden and Europe. The students became very curious, wanted to learn more, so I showed them pictures, and told them about the life and fate of Joan of Arc.

After the preparatory work sessions, we watched the performances.

### 3.3.2 Follow-Up Work

#### 3.3.2.1 Through Embodiment in the Form of Notes, Images, and Dance

In close connection to the performances, I first captured students' thoughts and feelings through discussions and/or through journal entries (written or drawn).

Afterwards the students used visual language by creating large group paintings based on their notes and images from their journals. These paintings became like a meeting place for their thoughts and experiences, which we then continued to use for further creativity in the form of written texts.

The students had the opportunity to portray the performance *Mantis and the Bee* through the language of dance, in a very successful workshop where two of the performers led the students through different parts of the story in a joyful and inspiring way.

*"I thought it was fun and good because you think that it is real, but it is not real. We imagined that we were a bee that could fly really well, and we thought it was for real."*

The quote above was taken from a students' journal entry.

#### 3.3.2.2 Through Writing Your Own Stories and Poems

The students' joint images became the starting point for the next step – storytelling in writing (see *Figure 10*).

The students created their own stories that, amongst other things, dealt with vulnerability but also on topics such as joy and friendship.

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They wrote poems about wishes, dreams and feelings.

Writing sessions occurred individually and in groups and those who wanted to got a chance to share their texts with their peers through a read-aloud session in class.

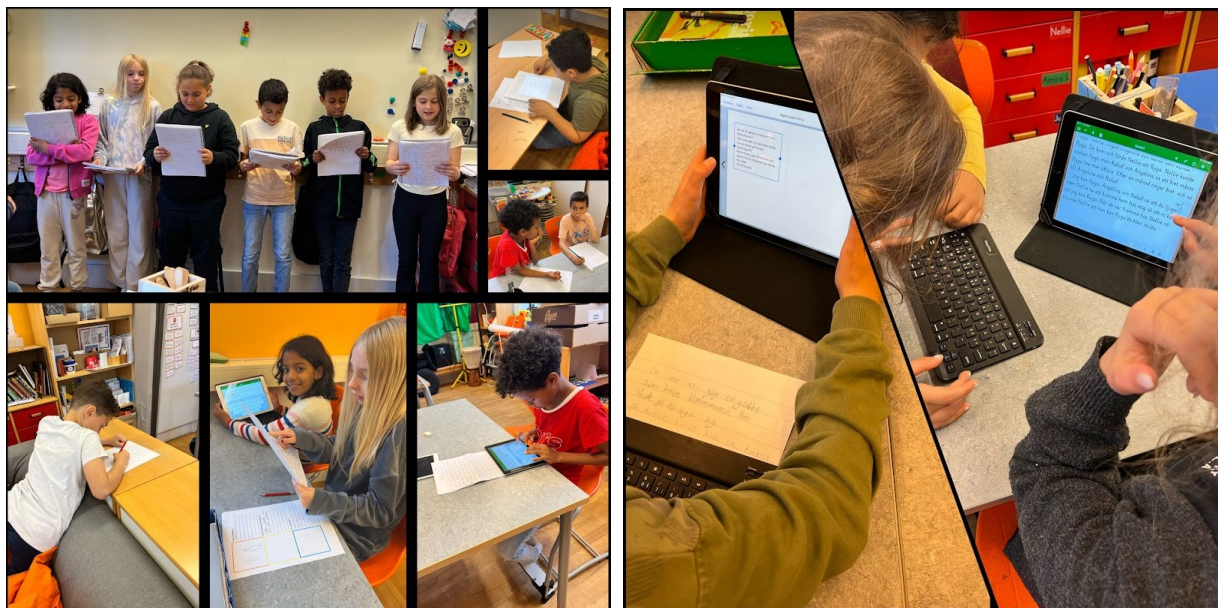


Figure 10. Writing different texts, individually and in groups.

### 3.3.2.3 Through the Important Conversation

Students who wanted to were also given the opportunity to speak further about their feelings and thoughts in smaller groups. I was present to offer guidance during the conversations and to ask different prompting questions.

The conversations we had were about what they remembered of their experiences after the performances, descriptions of the performances, details about the performers (actors/dancers), the sounds, lights, music, costumes, props etc.

As their teacher, I wanted to dig a little deeper into the students' thoughts and invited those willing to participate in smaller group discussions. I did this to share



several, varied understandings and opinions. At the same time, I also hoped to receive more nuanced answers as students often build on each other's thoughts.

The majority of the students have Swedish as a second language and have previously proven to be helped by expressing their opinions in group discussions with the support of their peers. During all our conversations, as well as to some extent within the stories/texts that the students wrote, we moved from a collective experience to individual experiences and feelings. A good example is a fairy tale that a student wrote. It was a story about a witch who was bullied by others. The student himself had experienced a similar event in real life and with the help of the fairy tale was given a channel to share his feelings.

## 4. Reflections and Thoughts

The overall aim of the pilot project was to try to find out students' honest thoughts about the performing arts and allow them to reflect and be creative based on their own personal experiences of the performing arts shows.

The question was, were they able to do this within the limited timeframe that they had at their disposal? The answer is, yes, to a certain extent. The students were given the opportunity to deepen their experiences by these differentiated methods, before and more importantly after, viewing the performances. The difficulties lay in finding a balance between not over-doing it pedagogically (framing the work in too strict of a school context) but rather allowing the experiences of the performing arts to have its own space to grow.

At the beginning of the project, it seemed as though the students thought they would be graded, and they were seeking the "correct answers" in order to "pass". A reason for this may have been that we had just recently completed a period of national exams. Despite having worked for many years taking students to various arts exhibitions, this time I found it difficult to ask open-ended questions that would lead to deeper levels of understanding and conversations. During the time we worked on this project, I started to release those inhibitions and the students became more spontaneous and willing to share more ideas. The theatre performances evoked many different emotions in the students, which we could have continued to work with. The students' responses to questions posed at the beginning of the project demonstrated that work done before the experiences do really matter. We should allow arts experiences to be inclusive in teaching and learning, rather than being an additional task that needs to be done at the end of the term or academic year.

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We worked with portraying through the media of dance, art, and stories. The arts experiences gave way for personal creativity and inspiration in different forms, in forums where I chose for the students to visualize the process through art (drawings) and writing. I placed no importance on the accuracy of the texts produced. The activities during the project were pre-planned by myself, both in terms of the forms of expression as well as the timeframe.

We experienced three arts performances over a short timeframe. The shows were varied in both execution and action, which gave us great opportunities to work with this further at school. If I could choose, I would have taken my students to the three performances with further time in between each one. I had initially planned to allow more time for discussions and individual storytelling, as well as giving students more autonomy to plan their own creative work. I would have given students more opportunities to use different mediums of expression e.g. drama performances, puppetry, paper dolls, papier-mâché, pods, music, and dance, simply put, tried to satisfy their wish for personal expression in order to share thoughts and issues raised.

There was, at the start of the project, a wish to be able to share the children's thoughts during the festival. However, since festivals rarely last longer than a week, it proved difficult especially when working with post- performance creative activities as well as allowing time for reflection. One idea could have been to carry out a joint workshop with students and festival delegates, on equal terms, where all participants would do a creative post- performance activity together during the festival week. The adults would get an opportunity to experience a creative process in collaboration with students, which is the best way to deepen experiences. This would require courageous workshop leaders who are not afraid to work across age boundaries and who master forms of practical, enjoyable activities that allow for depth of thought.

We hope to be able to present this project in the next academic school year during one of the exchange study days for Swedish performing arts organizations for children and youth, which are arranged for institutions, schools, and preschools. In addition to this report, a smaller exhibition of the students' work will be shown.

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## 5. Conclusion

Identity building, reflection and collaboration was something my students greatly needed, and this end of the year project gave us an added opportunity to do this through the performing arts experiences.

The performances were of high quality in terms of professionalism. They allowed for humour, playfulness, dance, music, and foreign spoken languages. The performances provided a prerequisite for different discussions and values without any given answers, instead from personal imagination and creative solutions.

Arts experiences give students the possibility to process impressions, test different identities and develop their creativity and ability to collaborate and communicate.

My advice to you: pause the timetable, work interdisciplinary across subject areas, and give the students reflection time and post-processing time. We do not lose time – we gain the overall development of the individual.



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