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FEATURE: Painting a Picture



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There's paint, brushes and pencils, but the students in this classroom in Regina's Thom Collegiate aren't studying visual art. It's actually part of an English class – they are learning visual literacy, as their teacher describes it.

When Joanne Weber, teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing program at Thom first met her six students, they were withdrawn and could barely read the back of a cereal box. This was not unusual, she explains:

“The average reading level for deaf and hard of hearing kids is about Grade 4,” she says. “Last year, when I had them writing things, it was so painful... they would take about four or five days to write a paragraph. It was like pulling teeth.”

But when I walked into the classroom earlier this month, I see students who are talkative, happy and proud to show me their latest projects: paintings, sketchbooks and shadow puppets. They even introduce themselves assertively to the camera.

So what’s the difference?

Weber says it’s the introduction of a visual story-telling project, funded by the Saskatchewan Arts Board and coordinated by multidisciplinary artist, Chrystene Ells.

“It was hard to make eye contact. It was hard to get them to talk to me,” says Ells of the beginning of the project, but by the end: “Some of them went up one or two whole grades in a couple of months.”

While there have been improvements in deaf education – for example the introduction of sign language – one researcher says the best method for teaching deaf and hard of hearing students is still to be discovered.

“There’s been dissatisfaction for at least 100 years or as many years as we’ve had organized education of the deaf,” explains James MacDougall, a McGill University professor.

He says Weber might be onto something: “Literacy is connected to language. Language is connected to thought and experience, so I think that introducing things like drama, like art and drawing, to engage students and engage communication can only have a positive impact on literacy.”

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