

Open house is high energy event

The recent open house for "Celebrate Learning at Summer School" didn't merely feature tables filled with examples of students' work. Parents who attended the open house, including Sue Suhum of Farmington Hills, instead were treated to real-life student expression, through song, dance and art.

"It's very good for the kids," said Suhum about the Farmington district program at Hillside Elementary School, which took place to help bilingual students throughout the district improve English language skills. "It's very nice."

Among students participating in the various open house presentations was her 10-year-old son, Lance.

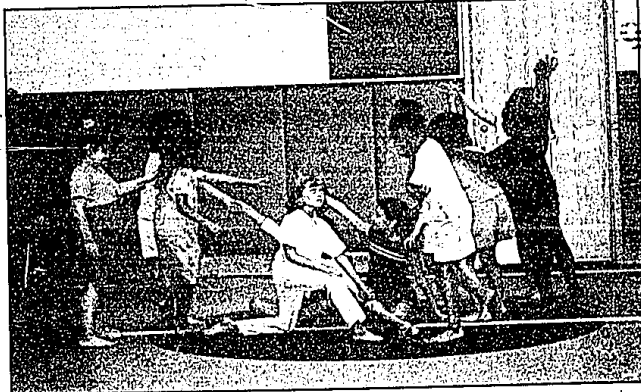
Suhum watched her son, and approximately 100 others in the program, in grades three-five, perform examples of innovative learning that took

place throughout.

Bobbi Lucas, a professional dancer with the Detroit Dance Collective, led youngsters in a word dance and a story dance. For the former, the sounding of a bell prompted movement to begin; students bent down and threw their hands high into the air while others moved frantically about them until the next bell.

They then depicted "The Stone Cutter" story, using lots of arm and leg movement while moving, twisting and jumping. One highlight was how they assembled, hand in hand, and used their bodies to form the shape of a jagged mountain.

Later, with the assistance of acoustic guitar-strumming Bill Boley, they sang songs, including "We Love the DIA," an ode to the Detroit Institute of Art and summer school instructor Pablo Steve Davis.



Artistic moves: Rochelle Aboo, Natalie Nazarova dance the "Stonecutter Story".

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dents enhance their understanding of the English language through sensory learning experiences such as music, dancing and art. Teacher Deborah Wilson was instrumental in developing the program and getting it off the ground.

According to Davis, a Detroit resident, the program is essential to bridge any difficulties some youngsters have in learning English. About half of the 100 students in the program — including those who recently moved to the United States from foreign countries — are experiencing varying degrees of difficulty becoming acclimated to the English language.

"With the great diversity here," Davis said, "obviously, we have language difficulties. Children have to learn language skills. So I start out with the proposition that children learn mainly through their aesthetic sensibilities. They can learn math better, science better, reading and writing better."

Students in the district-funded program learned from Pablo how to do 14 different painting strokes on a large sheet of paper taped to a wall.

"I'll have them stand and work rather than sit," the artist explained. "And I'll ask them to use their whole body. It's 'body motion art,' it's the notion that feelings and the mind turn into art."

Wilson said the style of teaching exhibited by Pablo and others during the session is "where we need to be going" in education. (This fall, she is leaving her position as a teacher in the districtwide bilingual education department for a fifth-grade position at Wooddale Elementary School.)

Traditionally, students learned by reading stories or other textbook materials and then discussing them in class.

Active learning

That style never got through the door at "Celebrate Learning at Summer School," Wilson said. Story themes are better learned actively, through music, art and dance.

"Brain research is literally exploding," she added. "We see how neurons are firing, we see how and where learning happens or doesn't happen."

Kilano noted how students

learned four program themes through sensory exercises such as "Word Wall Aerobics," where she and other teachers stood up at the front of the class and, in cheerleader mode, used arms to form alphabet letters.

By the time of the open house, students were gaining in self-esteem and in their acquisition of the English language.

"Naturally, we wanted their reading and writing to improve, that's a given," Kilano said. "But if their self-esteem is not built up and they can't identify with who they are, then I don't think they are in a position to learn."

Youngsters also learned through photography, with disposable cameras donated by F-Stop owner Dennis Knorr.

"Kids did their own autobiographies," Wilson said. "They took pictures of what is meaningful in their lives, their teachers, their homes ... And they wrote about that. So here you have kids connecting reading and writing to a product and a project."

To borrow a line from Pablo, could even be called a "beautiful connection."

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