Puppetry Brings Students’ Voices to Life
by Katy Boelter-Dimock, Lower School Art Teacher
In November 2017, for the third consecutive year, Cambridge Friends School was awarded the Massachusetts Cultural Council’s STARS grant (Students and Teachers working with Artists, Scientists, and Scholars). The STARS grant supported a project combining visual art, literacy, and performance designed in collaboration with Faye Dupras, master puppeteer. Katy Boelter-Dimock (visual art), Libby Stillwell (library), and Marytha Pathrath (music) worked with Faye to help third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students create puppets and performances based on retellings of traditional trickster tales.

In each year that we have developed a puppetry project, a central goal has been to feature student voices. Students contribute ideas about the settings, the specific details of the characters, and the flow of the action, as well as the scripts for each puppet project. Over time, we have seen that students’ investment in building their puppets and in performing increases as we have offered them more agency in the process. This has made for more carefully crafted art and more dynamic performances.

We noticed how much enthusiasm students displayed when given the opportunity to add improvised sounds, exclamations, and observations to the narrated script in rehearsals. In fact, without being asked, students eagerly memorized these additions, and produced them perfectly for performances. For the 2017-2018 project, Faye and the teachers decided to experiment with more directly involving the students in the narration and dialogue for each performance. We were excited by the prospect of expanding students’ voice, decision-making, problem solving, and vision.

When writing the scripts in third and fourth grade, students worked together to prioritize the important scenes within their two stories, *Jabuti the Tortoise* and *Grandmother Spider Rescues the Sun*. They composed dialogue for the relevant characters, debating as a group the wording that best conveyed the characters’ personalities. Students often altered the original texts in this process. In one instance, a classroom group decided that they wanted to change the climax of the action from a successful theft to a communication breakdown, resolved with generosity from the antagonists. Though the process required careful listening, dialogue, and patience, we could feel the students’ investment in the unique story they were crafting grow.

After the action for each shadow puppet was filmed, Faye created a professional-quality recording studio in the music room. Students were offered the chance to read the lines they had created for their own or a classmate’s puppet. In addition, the students were entirely responsible for reading the narration for each story. Student voices were central throughout each shadow puppet film.

In one of the stories, the main character plays a flute. The students agreed: the fourth-grade flutists in their class should supply this sound effect. This prompted a cascade of musical volunteers. Marytha worked with Faye and the students to record original music pieces, including third- and fourth-grade musicians on flute, piano, percussion, and guitar to enhance the film. The dynamic final shadow puppet films were clearly the product of the creativity, thoughtfulness, and effort.

In fifth grade, students began designing their script by fleshing out the specific personality traits of their puppet characters: Were they shy? Bossy? High energy? Students worked in pairs and trios and began to generate the dialogue that each character grouping would use to move the story along. Though the action of the story only required simple, repetitive dialogue, each student spontaneously added humorous remarks, asides that hinted at backstories, or exclamations. Student investment in creating memorable characters motivated the fifth graders to memorize their lines and blocking (where to move and stand on stage), and to patiently wait for their turn to rehearse. Their culminating performances were entertaining, charismatic, and distinctive of this particular group of students.

Having students active in every step of the process for creating the puppet productions—from crafting the scripts, to designing and building their puppets, to recording voices and music, to performing on stage—visibly increased the personality, creativity, and uniqueness of each piece. Students practiced patience, compromise, persuasiveness, and imagination as they worked as a team to craft every step of the puppet production process. Faye and the CFS literacy and arts team were so proud of the students’ efforts and hope to have the chance to put their ingenuity and creativity at the forefront of a puppet project again.