

# Fabulous Fashions

Links to Learning, Literacy, and Life

by Anne L. Thompson

"I feel famous," Margarita<sup>1</sup> exclaimed as she rushed to her family in her short, light blue dress, her tiara and high heels. "You look beautiful!" her mother said. Her father added, "You did a great job! We're proud of you." Margarita beamed.

All around the auditorium, scenes like this were playing out. Forty girls who participated in the Fabulous Fashions program at the M.S. 127 Champions Academics Sports & Arts Club in the Bronx, New York, had just completed a 1970s-themed fashion show. The girls chose a theme, researched the era, traveled to a fashion museum, sketched designs, sewed their clothes, and staged a full-scale fashion show, complete with pounding music and the middle school version of a catwalk. The girls knew they had done something special. They knew Fabulous Fashions had taught them valuable lessons in how to design and create clothes. But they had little idea that their work in the fashion class had also enhanced their literacy skills.

Much of the research over the past century or more on how to make students more receptive to learning

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supports the hypothesis that a program such as Fabulous Fashions can help students learn in the classroom and beyond. After a description of the program and my research design, this article will briefly examine some of this research, discussing the possibility that arts instruction enhances traditional academics. It will also address the roles of interest, emotion, motivation, and self-esteem in enhancing student engagement. That this program focuses on fashion is important not only because middle school girls are immersed in the topic but also because of its potential as a future career and its authenticity. Fashion can function as a sign system in and of itself, creating links to other sign systems including reading and writing activities. In sum, this article shows how a single class such as Fabulous Fashions can significantly affect students' lives.

### **Program Context**

M.S. 127, in the Castle Hill section of the Bronx, serves fifth through eighth graders, 50 percent of whom are Hispanic, 34 percent African American, 14 percent Asian, and 2 percent white, according to the 2002–2003 Annual School Report. It is considered a high-need school: 81 percent of students are eligible for free lunch. The school is at 113 percent of capacity. The average suspension rate for city schools is 43 per 1,000 students; at M.S. 127, the rate is 180 per 1,000. Crimes requiring police involvement are more than double the city average. Seventy-three percent of fifth through seventh graders fail to meet state English Language Arts standards, as do 77 percent of eighth graders (2002–2003 Annual School Report). Students enrolled in Fabulous Fashions are typical of students at the school. Some are enrolled in the college preparation program, but many are poor students who are failing one or more subjects or have disciplinary problems.

In 1998, the Sports & Arts in School Foundation, a nonprofit organization that today provides afterschool and summer programs to 152 New York City schools, instituted the Champions Academics Sports & Arts Club at M.S. 127. This comprehensive afterschool program runs for three hours every school day, serving 300 students. The After-School Corporation (TASC) provides much of the funding. Staff include teachers and paraprofessionals from the school, as well as adults and college students from the community, sports specialists, and parent volunteers.

Each day, after a group snack, fifth and sixth graders spend their first period engaged in sports and arts activities ranging from judo to “car art” to tennis, while the

seventh and eighth graders participate in homework help and academic enrichment. Homework help groups are led by college honors students and supervised by a teacher from the school. At 4:30, the students “flip”: fifth and sixth graders move to homework help while seventh and eighth graders proceed to sports and arts.

Sports and arts activities are led by subject specialists or occasionally by teachers from the school. Each activity meets two or three times a week. Students choose their sports and arts activities, though they are generally required to remain in the activity they choose for a full season, which lasts approximately three months. With three such seasons each year, students can explore activities in depth, while still trying a variety of activities.

### **Program Design**

In 2000, fashion design was added to the sports and arts offerings. Looking specifically for ways to engage girls, the site director spoke with program participants about their likes and dislikes, and nearly all the girls raved about fashion. Fashion design is offered three times a week; students who enroll are required to attend all three sessions. In keeping with the “flip” model, younger students attend first and then go to homework help as the older students come into the fashion program. As a fashion show nears, students might all work together for the entire three-hour block of time. Students may participate in as many seasons of fashion as they choose.

### **Instructor**

Fabulous Fashions has been led by the same instructor since its inception. Monique Martin is a professional fashion designer, not a teacher. Her relationship with her students is of particular importance to the success of Fabulous Fashions. Program participants adore her, although she is not warm or motherly toward them. She treats them as professionals and discusses little but fashion with them. She sets very high standards and expects all students to meet them. She helps students when they need it, but expects them to take charge of their work and produce their own outfits for the show.

Underneath her professional demeanor, Ms. Martin is a fierce advocate for Fabulous Fashions. She constantly lobbies the site director, Sports & Arts, and funders for more money, more fabric, and more sewing machines. On her own time and often unpaid, she takes students on trips around the city to museums or fashion exhibitions. She help girls who are interested in design high schools to prepare their portfolios and calls schools on their behalf.

## Content and Activities

Since Fabulous Fashions began, Ms. Martin's program model has changed. In the early days of the program, she spent a great deal of time on sewing, as opposed to true fashion design, using simple projects such as pincushions and hand-sewn fabric roses to teach basic skills. However, she realized that students were most interested in clothes, so now, while they may do one introductory project, they practice the rudiments of sewing on simple skirts or tube tops, moving quickly to more advanced clothing designs. She also spent a great deal of time early on teaching students how to work the program's six sewing machines safely. Now that she always has a base of students who know how to use sewing machines, she simply offers a brief overview of machine safety and lets older students mentor newer ones.

Early each season, Ms. Martin meets with students from all four grades to decide on a theme for their fashion show at the end of the season. Past themes include the 1960s, the 1970s, Hawaiian wear, patriotism, formal wear, and hip-hop. Ms. Martin reserves veto power; every year she turns down requests for a swimwear show. Once the theme is selected, students gather information about fashions related to the theme. They use the Internet to find articles and scour fashion magazines for pictures; topics such as the 1970s are also a great opportunity for parents to share their experience. For example, one student based her white swingy dress design on a picture of her father in a white outfit like the one John Travolta wore in *Saturday Night Fever*. Ms. Martin also brings in readings, pictures from her personal collection, and her own designs. Research and reading continue throughout the season as students refine their ideas.

Once students have some design ideas, Ms. Martin gives each student a croque, a sketch of the body. Students draw their designs onto the figure, and she gives them feedback. She helps students compose a detailed picture of a fashion design they want to create, determining the proportions, colors, and style. Ms. Martin then brings in fabric she has been acquiring. With her help, students examine the fabric choices and decide which are the most appropriate for their designs. Ms. Martin helps student make or use patterns, measure, and cut their fabric, which they then sew by hand or on a machine. Depending on their design, students might be making buttonholes, sewing zippers, casing elastic, and performing other complex tasks.

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The atmosphere is both social and intensely serious. Students work in small groups at their own pace, talking a bit to their friends. Although they have the opportunity to goof off, few do. In fact, students I spoke with said they did not like one student because she was often talking and fooling around, rather than working on her sewing. Student work is almost completely self-directed, in contrast to their teacher-directed work during the school day.

As they create their outfits, students are also planning their fashion show. They choose the music and create the backdrop. Ms. Martin discusses how to model to best show off clothes, and students practice. They then choreograph the entire elaborate production. All students who complete their outfits are in the show, which provides a strong incentive to finish their work. The rare student who does not want to be in the show can work backstage or hand out programs. Finally, students present the show to families, friends, classmates, the principal, and the PTA.

## Research Design

As director of special projects for the Sports & Arts in Schools Foundation, I observed Fabulous Fashions since shortly after its inception. I worked with Ms. Martin to strengthen the program's academic connections and prepared the written curriculum described below. In preparation for this article, I prepared a survey asking participants about their experiences in the program and at school; I also asked about their likes and dislikes, reading habits, school attendance, school discipline problems, self-confidence, expectations, and visions of the future. Most questions could be answered yes or no, although some had space for students to write comments. Twenty-seven students completed the questionnaire. I also conducted two focus groups each with fifth and sixth graders and with seventh and eighth graders. The groups covered most of the topics addressed in the surveys but gave participants the opportunity to expand on their comments. I also conducted individual interviews with several girls. Quotations in this article come from the focus groups and interviews. I talked with Ms. Martin and the site director about program design and attended several fashion shows. After the 1970s show in spring 2004, I went backstage to talk with participants and their parents.

## Links to Literacy

Students enjoy participating in Fabulous Fashions and are extremely proud of their work. When I asked stu-



dents in focus groups whether they liked the activity and why, their responses included “It is fun,” “It makes me feel happy,” “I feel different, like nobody else,” and “I feel like I have a special talent.” All 26 students who answered the survey question on whether they enjoyed the class said that they did; all 25 who answered the question agreed that they were proud of themselves for what they had accomplished. Fabulous Fashions has a high rate of re-enrollment; nine of the 27 students surveyed had participated for more than three seasons. As one student said in her interview, “I can’t wait to get school over with so I can get to fashion.”

Because students are busy enjoying Fabulous Fashions, they do not realize that they are learning valuable academic skills. To gather information about their fashion show theme, students must carry out research, which involves reading, analysis, and discussion. They examine historical trends in fashion, learning the circumstances that, for example, led to long or short skirts. When measuring and cutting fabric, students learn that math is not simply hypothetical. When, in focus groups, I pointed out to students that they were engaged in math

and history, they shrugged. Nupur said, “Sort of, but we’re really just learning about fashion.”

Fabulous Fashions also has a written curriculum I designed to enhance academic skills. It consists of 15 lessons that address such topics as the history of fashion in the 20th century, street fashion as observed in the *New York Times*, how fashion changes show the evolution of women’s roles, types of fashion shows, elements of design, marketing and merchandising, and fashion careers. Since the Champions Club tries not to overwhelm students with academics, the teacher and homework tutors implement this curriculum selectively, based on the academic backgrounds and interests of Fabulous Fashion students.

### ***The Arts and Academics***

Many educators, artists, and policymakers argue that training in the arts enhances academic performance. For example, Americans for

the Arts (2002) noted that young people who regularly participated in arts activities were more likely to win awards for academic achievement, attendance, or writing activities; to be elected to a class office; and to participate in a math and science fair than were students who did not participate in the arts. Other studies that found links between arts education and academic performance have assessed low-income students who receive art instruction after school (Brice Heath, 1998), examined low-income students in arts-integrated schools (Catterall & Waldorf, 1999), and assessed standardized test scores of both higher- and lower-income students with high or low levels of exposure to the arts (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999). However, some researchers argue against a causal relationship between arts education and academic achievement. Winner and Cooper (2002), for example, explained the correlation by concluding that higher-achieving, more motivated students are drawn to the arts and other extracurricular activities. I do not believe, however, that this is true of Fabulous Fashions, whose participants were typical of students in this high-need school.

### **Fashion Design and Academics**

The arts addressed in these studies included visual arts, drama, dance, and music, but not fashion design. Instead of being classified as an art, fashion design is more likely to be included in the vocational track of studies. Fashion is indeed a vocational subject in that it requires hands-on activity and specialized training that students can apply immediately to jobs after high school. Yet fashion design is also an art. It is similar to the visual arts in that fashion designers must master such visual elements as color theory, perspective, proportion, and design; the result is a personal, creative expression in fabric rather than on paper or canvas. In addition, fashion shows display elements of both dance and drama.

Because of its hybrid nature, fashion's potential for enhancing literacy has been largely unexplored. But the combination of higher-order thinking and visualization skills required by fashion design, coupled with the fact that today's youth particularly value clothing, makes fashion a potent springboard for student learning. Simply put, if fashion design provides students with opportunities to read, write, do math, or learn history, then it is helping to improve students' literacy skills. I have no hard data showing a causal link between fashion and academic performance. I can't say that Fabulous Fashions added an extra five points to participants' grades or improved their test scores. I *can* say that when the topic was fashion, students indicated that they were receptive to reading, writing, and other traditional literacy activities. In my survey, 89 percent of students said they used problem-solving skills in Fabulous Fashions; 89 percent read fashion magazines sometimes or often. They were interested in learning about the business and financial side of fashion (89 percent) and in learning about the history of fashion (70 percent). For students who told me how much they disliked school and groaned particularly loudly when I mentioned writing, this level of interest was impressive. As one student said in a focus group, "It's more fun to write about what you like—it could be basketball or puppets or fashion, it doesn't matter what." Students will apply themselves to literacy activities in the right context. The trick is to get students to focus on content they are interested in, such as fashion, rather than on a particular academic discipline, such as writing.

### **Why Fabulous Fashions Fosters Learning**

A major reason students will engage in academic activities in the context of fashion is, simply, that they like



fashion. They dress fashionably, watch fashion TV, and talk about fashion. When surveyed, 27 out of 27 participants said they were excited to be in Fabulous Fashions and that they tried to behave well so they could stay in the class. Research on the role of interest and emotion on brain development, on the roles of motivation and self-esteem in learning, and on the importance of alternative sign systems and multiple intelligences

shows why the students' level of interest is crucial to their literacy learning in Fabulous Fashions.

### **Interest, Emotion, and Brain Development**

Interest in a subject leads to active engagement of the brain. Such active engagement, in turn, leads to increased connections among neurons (Wilson & Wilson Horch, 2002). Emotion, too, triggers brain activity. Strong emotional experiences produce strong memories that reinforce related neural pathways (Wolfe & Brandt, 1998; Sylwester, 2000). If a student is interested in fashion or sports, math or history, those are the connections that will be reinforced.

Sensorimotor experiences, in which both senses and motor skills are engaged, increase attention, interest, and emotion, thus improving neural connections (Wilson & Wilson Horch, 2002). Fabulous Fashions provides fully integrated sensorimotor experiences. Students must visualize how their projects will look before they begin to measure fabric; they manipulate materials with their hands; they move around the room from the magazine corner to the sewing machines. This hands-on work appeals to many students; as Sareen noted in a focus group, "In fashion, Ms. Martin shows us how to do work. In school they don't show you, they tell you."

### **Motivation**

Interest in and emotional feelings about an activity lead to increased intrinsic motivation (Graham & Weiner, 1996). Intrinsic motivation means engaging in a task simply because one enjoys it. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is doing something to obtain a reward such as a good grade or parental praise. The problem with extrinsic motivation is that, when rewards are eliminated, students may stop working. Students who are intrinsically motivated continue to work for their own enjoyment.

Most students in Fabulous Fashions are intrinsically motivated. They do not receive grades for their designs. Of the 23 students who explained in my survey their reasons for working hard, only four gave reasons that might be considered extrinsic. The rest gave reasons such as "Because I want to," "To make my stuff better," "So I can learn," and "So I can finish." Margarita said in an interview, "I push myself because I like it."

Creating intrinsic motivation in an afterschool program can be a starting point for developing student initiative to work and to learn in the classroom. "Classroom instructional practices that sustain children's natural curiosity and intrinsic interest in learning no doubt contribute to their perception of learning as something that is enjoyable and nurture their desire to engage in learning tasks in other settings" (Stipek, 1996, p. 96). Through Fabulous Fashions, participants learn that thinking and literacy activities can be enjoyable, so they may approach at least some school-day projects with increased interest and motivation.

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### **Self-esteem**

Mastering moderately difficult tasks and creating high-quality products lead to feelings of competence and pride among Fabulous Fashions students. Some students in the program had grown accustomed to failure;

many who showed me their report cards were happy that they had failed only one subject. In contrast, students felt successful in Fabulous Fashions. Of 25 children who responded to the survey question, 24 felt they had done a good job in the class. Anyone who attends the fashion show can see that students feel good about themselves, as illustrated in the vignette that opens this article.

Students were proud of the way the clothing they made demonstrated their mastery of fashion design. To determine the quality of their work, students compared it with their expectations, decided whether it looked and hung correctly, determined whether the stitching was correct, and so on. What they did not do was to compare their clothes to those made by other students. This mastery standard for success, as opposed to one where students judge their worth by comparing themselves to others, is linked to positive student achievement (Stipek, 1996).

Despite the importance of a mastery standard, peer recognition also furthers confidence and pride. Many Fabulous Fashion students talked about peer reaction to their fashion show. In focus groups, participants said they sometimes felt like celebrities in school the day after a show. While parents and teachers may have appreciated how hard students worked, their peers were the ones who most appreciated the finished product—the clothes. Fabulous Fashion students were showing peers that they could excel in a category near and dear to middle school students' hearts.

Student pride was reinforced by family reaction. At the fashion show, parents cheered from the minute the first student took the stage to the finale. Afterward, families rushed backstage to praise the students. After the 1970s show, I heard comments that included “I’m proud of you,” “Nice work,” and “You looked like a professional designer.” In the survey, participants said these comments made them feel “proud and pleased,” “even more confident,” “happy I did this work for something,” “like a professional,” and “confident, pretty, and that I should not give up.” Since middle school is a difficult time for children, particularly girls (Mikel Brown & Gilligan, 1992), such family reaction is especially critical.

### **Many Literacies, Many Intelligences**

Fashion design can also function as a non-language-based “sign system.” Researchers point out that reading, writing, and other traditional literacy activities are not the only sign systems for knowing about and communicating with the world. Sign systems such as music, math, and art provide different ways to understand the world. Students can use the sign systems with which they are most comfortable to “wiggle” this world so it makes sense to them (Berghoff, Egawa, Harste, & Hoonan, 2000). Once students have gained some perspective, they can integrate sign systems, including those most accepted by adult culture, such as language, with those most relevant to them, such as fashion.

Howard Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences helps explain why different sign systems work better for different children. Gardner posits the existence of seven types of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. All people possess all seven intelligences, but in different degrees (Gardner, 1983). By engaging many of Gardner’s intelligences, Fabulous Fashions provides entry for students with widely diverging aptitudes. Students with strong logical-mathematical intelligence, who search for patterns and are more comfortable when things are quantified, flourish on the measurements and patterns needed in fashion design. Students with keen spatial intelligence, who see visual images when they close their eyes and like to draw, do well with the visualization and sketching in Fabulous Fashions. Students with strong bodily-kinesthetic intel-

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ligence, who need to touch things to learn about them and would rather practice a skill than read about it, thrive on the fact that they have to be out of their seats, manipulating fabric and sewing. Fabulous Fashions helps those students who learn best interpersonally through its social setting and the focus on producing a show collaboratively, yet students who learn best intrapersonally can work alone at their own pace. Finally, Fabulous Fashions calls on participants to bring together all of their multiple intelligences to look at problems in a variety of ways.

### **Vocational Preparation**

The “realness” or authenticity of fashion to students is key to the impact of Fabulous Fashions. Fashion design is real in that students can wear the clothes they make; it is authentic in that its hands-on training can lead to a specific career, or at least create a pattern of thinking toward the future.

### **Authenticity**

The practical, hands-on nature of fashion design creates strong learning opportunities. John Dewey, the progressive educator, was an early proponent of integrating vocational work with traditional academics.

There is nothing which strikes more oddly upon the average intelligent visitor than to see boys as well as girls of ten, twelve, and thirteen years of age engaged in sewing and weaving. If we look at this from the standpoint of preparation of the boys for sewing on buttons and making patches, we get a narrow and utilitarian concept—a basis that hardly justifies giving prominence to this sort of work in the school. But if we look at it from another side, we find that this work gives the point of departure from which the child can trace and follow the progress of mankind in history, getting an insight also into the materials used and the mechanical principles involved. In connection with these occupations the historic development of man is recapitulated. (Dewey, 1915, p. 14)

Dewey believed that school was too divorced from the reality of students’ lives, but that purely technical training was too limited in a world where jobs rapidly become obsolete. He argued that the skills students need

to thrive in the world are adaptability, ingenuity, creativity, and the like, and that such skills are most likely to arise from a combination of hands-on and theoretical approaches. True vocational education, Dewey wrote, involves a “balance between the intellectual and practical phases of experience” (Dewey, 1915, p. 83).

To achieve this balance, Fabulous Fashions uses sewing as a basis for exploration on the part of students for whom traditional classroom literacy approaches have not worked well. For example, many students told me in focus groups that history was their worst subject, that it was “dumb” and “boring.” Yet after students picked the 1970s theme, they engaged in significant historical research. They visited the Fashion Institute of Technology to view clothes from that era. They visited a designer who makes historical clothing for movies and Broadway shows. Students tried on the clothes and incorporated ideas they encountered into their own fashion projects. They discussed why clothing in the past was different from what people wear today. Clearly, the students were interested in history—if it was presented in a context that interested them and in ways that they could touch and recreate.

### **Readiness for the Future**

Most students in Fabulous Fashions are thinking about future schools and careers. Twenty-six out of 27 students surveyed had thought about high school, even though the fifth and sixth graders were years away from the prospect. Of these, seven were interested in fashion high schools, and six in arts-related high schools. Participants had also thought beyond high school. Having visited the Fashion Institute of Technology, many hoped to attend there. They



were also aware of other specialized colleges such as Parsons School of Design, Ms. Martin’s alma mater.

In discussing their career plans, 11 students said they plan to be fashion designers and six to be models. Eleven students said they intend to pursue other arts such as dancing, acting, and singing. One student planned to open her own fashion design shop. In fact, she had planned her career down to the details, as she wrote in a paper for one of her school-day classes:

If I had a business I would have a fashion company. It would be named Fashions by Kathy. I really don’t think I will hire more than 14 people to work at my company. Some of the people I hire will be family members because some also want to be fashion designers. My business will be in a very big space where everybody can see it. Also I will design anything you can think of, but it will have to be Kathy’s way or another’s way. I would want to be famous because of what I do and because of my store.

Of course, the careers young people eventually pursue are not necessarily the ones they consider in middle school. The important point is that Fabulous Fashions students are strategizing about and visualizing their future. One of the most important results of Fabulous Fashions may be the fact that 93 percent of participants polled—students who live in a high-crime area and attend a high-need school, students whose parents have generally not attended college and have unfulfilling jobs—felt hopeful about the future. By making academic and career options a part of everyday conversation, Fabulous Fashions provides students with a vision of a successful, productive future.



## Reaching Students

Fabulous Fashions takes a topic that adults might consider “fluff,” but that students value highly, and transforms it into an educational tool. The class fosters critical thinking skills, motivation, self-esteem, and planning for the future in students whom traditional methods have failed to reach. By placing learning in a context that students can see, touch, and enjoy, Fabulous Fashions provides them with greater enthusiasm and capacity for achievement both after and during school.

In our increasingly standards-based world, after-school programs such as Fabulous Fashions remain havens where children can develop their own interests and strengths, which may not coincide with those valued in school. The trick is to endow such afterschool experiences with meaning: to go beyond the catwalk to use student curiosity, interest, and motivation to cultivate literacy in all of its incarnations. If we equip students with tools to use in a context they enjoy and enable them to feel confident about their abilities, we will both foster their success in traditional academics and allow them to explore their world in personally meaningful ways.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Names of program participants are pseudonyms.