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ABSTRACT

An effective tool for motivating children to read and for reinforcing their reading skills, creative drama includes all forms of improvised drama--dramatic play, pantomime, puppet shows, and story dramatization--and all four of the major language arts--listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The use of creative drama activities lets children enjoy themselves as they improve such reading readiness skills as visual and auditory discrimination, listening, oral expression, and articulation and as they build such reading skills as vocabulary development, sentence and story comprehension, word meanings, visualization, and sentence recognition. Creative drama can also motivate children to read as they do research on a topic for dramatization or become interested in reading more about subjects they have dramatized. (JM)

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Creative Drama for Building Proficiency in Reading

Creative drama includes all forms of improvised drama, such as dramatic play, pantomime, puppet shows, and story dramatization. It is created spontaneously by the players themselves as an expression of their feelings or an interpretation of the characters in a story. Although creative drama is not new, only in recent years have educators recognized its value for enhancing a child's learning experiences.

Creative drama can be an effective way to develop a child's reading proficiency. It is not meant to replace sound reading instruction, but it can be used as a supplementary tool for motivating children to read and for reinforcing reading skills in a way that makes reading fun. Creative drama can also be used as an alternate approach to reading instruction wher traditional methods fail.

All four of the major language arts--listening, speaking, reading, and writing--are involved in creative drama. It motivates children to listen and speak, and encourages them to read and write as they research background material for use in dramatizations.

Creative Drama for Reading Readiness

In order to learn to read with ease, a child needs certain skills that may be developed through creative drama. Directionality and visual perception can be developed through various creative drama exercises such as the following. The teacher can be a toymaker who has turned children into toy soldiers and dolls that can only move to the left or right as directed. In another game, the teacher

stands with her back to the class and the children become her shadows by imitating her movements as she calls, "Raise your right leg," or "Wave your left hand."

Children can become more skillful in visual discrimination by using their bodies to form shapes. Either with partners or alone, children can copy numerals and letter shapes with their bodies in order to learn them kinesthetically.

Tucker (10) suggested developing auditory discrimination by using a sound effects record as a stimulus for guessing different sounds. The children respond by making the sounds with their voices or depicting the sounds with their bodies. Siks (8, p.280) felt that children would improve in auditory discrimination by

> becoming a train engine that moves fast or slow; a train with a light load or a heavy one; a train that has a big or a little engine; a train that whistles with a loud or soft whistle; a train that is near or far away; a train that is a "diesel, electric, or heavy freight."

Children who know they will be dramatizing a story after they hear it will have a good reason for listening carefully to the sequence, dialogue, main ideas, and details of the story. They must pay careful attention in order to recreate the story and to interpret the characters as they appeared. They also must listen respectfully to each other in order to communicate sensibly during their improvisation.

Oral expression develops naturally and easily in the informal atmosphere provided by creative drama. Children learn to speak spontaneously and fluently because they need to keep the story going. Many of them lose their self consciousness when they become characters in stories. Smilansky's (9) study of kindergarten children revealed that increased participation in dramatic play resulted in more

verbalization.

Shaw (7, p.199) claimed that creative drama

> should help children to become aware of the ways in which words, inflections, and gesture shape and convey meaning; it should give them an opportunity to develop their skills in encoding and decoding communications.

Children who are communicating a dramatic situation to an audience discover the importance of choosing the right words, of speaking expressively, and of enunciating clearly.

Quite often creative drama can provide the motivation for improving articulation. Hayes (3) reported that school children who spoke "pidgin" English developed better intonation and clearer enunciation as a result of participating in a creative drama program. In their studies Ludwig (4) and Woolf and Myers (11) showed that creative drama produced greater improvement in articulation than other methods of instruction.

Perryman (5) pointed out that children begin to understand the need for reading written symbols when engaged in dramatic play. The youngster who plays truck driver reads road signs and a child who shops in a grocery store must be able to recognize labels on cans.

Creative Drama for Building Reading Skills

Reading skills are developed through creative drama in a variety of ways. Children recognize the need for increasing their vocabularies because they have a real purpose for knowing the right words while they are in character. By acting out such descriptive words as wicked, starving, or greedy from the stories they read, they are clarifying the meanings of these words. At the same time

they may work on expanding their meaning vocabularies by thinking words which mean the same as the words they are portraying. Children may suggest bad and evil as synonyms for wicked.

Children have fun learning the meanings of antonyms by playing "Opposites." The teacher has word cards containing pairs of antonyms. Two children come to the teacher and each takes one word card from a set of antonyms. They dramatize their words in turn and their classmates guess what the word pair is. When a correct answer is given, the cards are held up by the actors for the class to see, and another pair of children choose words.

Vocabulary can also be developed through the game "Magic Modifiers," in which the students portray their concepts of a greedy giant, a dejected giant, and an angry giant, as well as the ideas of eating delicately and eating voraciously. Another game which can help build vocabulary is "Varied Verbs." In it, the children act out verbs which are close in meaning but have slightly different connotations: walked, sauntered, shuffled, strode, and others. Children learn how suffixes can change the meanings of words as they pretend to be sleepy or sleeping. Borden (1) reported another activity designed to turn action words into sight words. She would write the name of a child on the board along with an action word in this manner: "Jack, jump!" The child named would be expected to perform the action. Borden found this approach to be successful with children who were unable to recognize any other words.

Sentence comprehension can be developed by a game called "The Sentence Says" in which a sentence is read by a child or a group of children, and the child or children act out what the sentence says. Paragraph comprehension can be developed by a parallel

game called "Play the Paragraph" which is the same as "The Sentence Says," except that the children read and act out a paragraph.

To develop comprehension of an entire selection, story dramatization can be used. When the children read (or listen to) the story to be dramatized, they must make inferences about the reasons for actions of certain characters, the basic natures of the different characters and their emotions, and incidents which led up to the events in the story. They need to use critical reading skills to determine whether the story is real or make believe and whether the characters are believable in the situations in which they are found. Careful attention to the details in the story is necessary or the dramatization will not be accurate, and, if sequence is not carefully noted, the play will not progress smoothly and logically. Visualization skills must be used to picture the setting and characters involved in the story.

Visualization is the ability to picture what the written word is describing. One game, "Stretching the Imagination," is especially good for developing visualization. In it the students are given a list of things to which they must react. In order to react appropriately, they are asked to visualize the appearance, taste, smell, and feel of the named object or place. Examples of things to be named include sugar cookies, lemons, skunks, lizards, the seashore, and a snowy hillside.

"Who Am I?" is a game that helps develop a special type of visualization--visualization of the characteristics of people in selections being read. Children read a story and then take turns walking, running, and talking in a way that portrays one character from the story. The rest of the group tries to identify the character.

To develop the skill of recognizing sequence, the students can read nursery rhymes and then act out each rhyme in sequence. Good choices include "Little Jack Horner" and "Little Miss Muffett."

Dramatization of certain types of literature can greatly enhance the children's comprehension of the written material. Borden (1)reported that children who had difficulty understanding the morals of fables which were read to them understood the morals after reliving the fables through dramatization. Dramatization of stories also can help the children to sense the mood of the selections.

After a child has been involved in acting out a number of stories his oral reading expression will begin to improve, for he will have begun to "think the dialogue" in terms of oral presentation as he reads. He will be more aware of the clues to oral expression embodied in the punctuation if he has been guided to attend to such clues when preparing for a dramatization.

In addition to other contributions of story dramatization, it provides motivation for children to do research on the period in which the story is set or the characters in the story. Children are thus enticed to use encyclopedias, history books, and biographies to make sure their presentations are authentic.

Creative reading skills can be developed by having the children read a story up to a certain point and then act out the way they think it will end, or by having them change one happening in a story they have read and act out how that would affect the ending. If they can adequately do these things, they are truly able to read "beyond the lines."

Carlton and Moore (2) compared reading gains of culturally disadvantaged children who participated in self-directive dramatization of stories as a part of their reading instruction and

culturally disadvantaged children who received traditional basal reading instruction. They found significantly greater improvement in reading in the group which used self-directive dramatization. They also found a correlation between progress in reading and improvement in self concept.

Creative Drama for Motivating and Evaluating Reading

Creative drama can be a tremendous motivational force for reading. When students wish to do a dramatization, they may be encouraged to read numerous selections to find one that is just right to use. After a story has been chosen for dramatization, the children will be motivated to read it again in order to adequately visualize the setting and characters, get the sequence firmly in mind, and decide upon the scene divisions. They will also be drawn to other sources to do research on the period and/or characters.

Once they have been introduced to a type of literature or particular time period or character through creative drama, some of the children will become fascinated with this new experience and will seek to read more along these lines because of their curiosity or for pure enjoyment. For example, Hayes (3) reported that drama has been effective in leading Hawaiian children to the reading of Hawaiian myths and legends.

According to Rike (6), creative drama can serve as a group method of diagnosis and remediation. Some misconceptions of words are revealed while the children are dramatizing a situation. These misconceptions can be corrected as the teacher guides the children toward developing acceptable concepts. Siks (8) pointed out that teachers can check reading comprehension by having them act out the answers to questions about the story or encouraging them to become

characters from the story. Children show their awareness of story sequence, their knowledge of details, their understanding of the characters, and their sensitivity to the mood of the story by the way they play their parts. If weaknesses in any of these areas are revealed, the teacher can plan additional activities to strengthen these inadequacies.

The numerous examples in this paper indicate that creative drama can make an important contribution to the development of children's reading skills. Perhaps the most exciting part of this contribution is the fact that the children are learning while they are enjoying themselves--to them creative drama is play, but it is certainly highly rewarding play!

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