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Using Drama and Theatre To Promote Literacy Development: Some Basic Classroom Applications. ERIC Digest.

Although numerous researchers have emphasized the tremendous effect drama and theatre can have on children's cognitive and affective development as well as provided abundant resources for teachers, there still exists a gap between understanding its value and actually applying it (Furman, 2000). The reasons teachers still hesitate to embrace the ideas of utilizing drama and theatre in classroom activities can be summarized as follows: (1) In the search for drama resources to develop curricula, teachers are easily overwhelmed by various terms used in drama and theatre, such as creative drama, creative dramatics, developmental drama, process drama, educational drama, improvisational drama, improvisation, informal drama, classroom drama, drama in education, etc. (2) Dramatic activities tend to be placed at the "edge" of the official curriculum; they seem to be time-consuming and unnecessary. (3) Since most teacher education programs do not offer courses related to drama and theatre, teachers are unfamiliar with facilitating dramatic activities (Furman, 2000). (4) Dramatic activities are so playful that teachers might be afraid that children will not take learning seriously. In light of these factors that hinder teachers in the use of drama and theatre in classroom application, this Digest will explain the "myths" of drama and theatre and focus on their effect on children's literacy development. In addition, rather than presenting a tour de force of resources, this Digest will highlight some readily applicable strategies for classroom application.

THE CONFUSING TERMINOLOGY

Historically, the field of drama for children in America has been associated more with pedagogy than with theatre studies; hence, theories are generated more from education than theatre arts or performance studies. However, practitioners cannot agree on one specific title to define their art, so all the terms listed above have been used. These terms usually reflect the various methods practiced by these theorists (Woodson, 1999). "Drama" and "theatre" generally refer to the process and the production, respectively; however, in classroom application, the focus should be shifted from learning drama to emphasizing the process of learning through drama. In this Digest, activities that incorporate drama and theatre methods will be referred to as "dramatic activities."

THE NECESSITY OF DRAMATIC ACTIVITIES

Dramatic activities are crucial to early literacy development because children can be involved in reading and writing as a holistic and meaningful communication process (McNamee, McLane, Cooper, & Kerwin, 1985). In addition, researchers have discovered that the mental requirements for understanding drama are similar to those for reading. For instance, the meaning of a reading is generally grasped in a transaction between the reader and the text. "Process drama" refers to a teaching method that involves children in imaginary, unscripted, and spontaneous scenes, in which the meaning is made from the engagement and transactions between the teacher and students (Schneider & Jackson, 2000). In addition, reading can also stand for a "process of interpreting the world," which endorses drama as a powerful learning medium because it provides a context for children to relate to their lived experience. In writing development, children who experience drama also appear to be more capable of making appropriate linguistic choices as well as expressing opinions or suggesting solutions (McNaughton, 1997).

FACILITATING EFFECTIVE DRAMATIC ACTIVITIES

Many teachers feel intimidated by the idea of leading students in dramatic activities; however, most dramatic activities do not require teachers to have direct theatre experience (Beehner, 1990). The intriguing nature of drama and theatre lies in its flexibility, plasticity, and continuity. There are no specific patterns or models for most dramatic activities. When drama and theatre serve as teaching methods, teachers should view them as a concept and a philosophy rather than a set of curriculum models. Several applicable dramatic activities are:

USING DRAMATIC STORY REENACTMENTS TO DEVELOP CHILDREN'S NARRATIVE

COMPETENCEIn dramatic story reenactments (DSR), children act out or use puppets to informally perform the stories they recreate. In her research, Martinez (1993) explained in detail how teachers can foster children's sense of story structure by encouraging DSR, which promotes their narrative competence. For children from preschool to second grade, researchers have demonstrated that children who reenact stories are better at connecting and integrating events to storytelling than children in a story reading group (Saltz & Johnson, 1974). DSR can also increase children's curiosity about literature before independent reading begins (McMaster, 1998). Martinez further described how the teacher in her kindergarten classroom supports spontaneous, child-initiated, and child-directed DSR activities. The teacher frequently used repeated readings, predictable stories, and intense response activities, and she also cooperated with a second grade class, having some of its students come to her class and do DSR for her kindergarteners. She also designed a very comfortable classroom library center, which is the most visited spot where children will reenact stories spontaneously.

DRAMA ACTIVITIES THAT PROMOTE VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Vocabulary proficiency plays a crucial role in children's literacy development. In their studies, Alber and Foil (2003) illustrate how to effectively introduce new vocabulary and facilitate the learning activities with dramatic techniques. "Creating a memorable event" is recommended when introducing new vocabulary. The authors depict several scenarios in the article. For instance, while children are getting ready for the class, teachers might say, "Ok, it's time to do some work. Take your cat, rock your desk, and start to write about the trees on the ceiling." Students are likely to respond with "what?" or "that doesn't make any sense." Teachers can continue this "game" until everybody pays attention and looks puzzled. Teachers then respond with "I'm sorry. I am being incoherent. So, what do you think incoherent means?"
To reinforce and extend comprehension, teachers can read students stories that contain the new vocabulary words. They may also ask students to act out the corresponding action or have them draw a word card out of the new vocabulary box, and act out the definition for other children to guess. For older children, teachers can ask them to create a skit illustrating the meaning of a vocabulary term. Teachers should help students to understand vocabulary in the context of literature by providing relevant literature pieces. Teachers can also list several new vocabulary items and have students write short stories using them.

INCORPORATING PROCESS DRAMA INTO WRITING INSTRUCTION

How does drama extend children's literacy development and how does children's writing demonstrate their engagement with and understanding of literary texts? Crumpler and Schneider (2002) conduct a cross-study analysis of writing from first, second, and third grade classrooms to answer these questions. In the first grade classroom, the teacher and his first graders read Where the Wild Things Are (Sendak, 1963). Then, the teacher placed the students in roles as "wild things," so that they had the chance to view the story from the perspective of characters within the text. The teacher then asked them questions (in the case of this story, how they survived on their island), which helped children to elaborate on their characters. In the process, some children developed a new character: Maxina, who was Max's older sister. The next day, the teacher took this further, casting the boys as Max and girls as Maxina to travel back to the island. The teacher asked children to describe what might be needed for this journey back to the island. After they "arrived" on the island, the teacher asked what they saw there. After this activity was completed, the teacher and children spent ten minutes discussing what they thought about it. Then, the teacher asked children to respond to the question: Think about the journey to the island, and draw and write about what you like and remember about it. In children's writing, this drama activity seems to have scaffolded children's ability to explore the boundaries between reader/writer and character/actor

and to create sophisticated text and image relationships as developing writers.
In the second and third grade classroom, the teacher and the students studied the topic of immigrants. They first spent several days reading and discussing immigrants' stories from children's literature and the students started to create tableaux or frozen scenes of the immigrants' experiences. Then the students had to write, in the role of their characters from the tableau, about what they thought.

In addition, students also created written documents for the immigrants such as passports and photo albums. They read both fiction and non-fiction and created documentaries on the immigrants' lives. As a result, students not only learned about immigrants' experiences but also learned to write in roles from others' perspectives, to write for various purposes, and to write across different genres. Through this curriculum, children develop a firmer understanding of the role and the relevance which writing can have in their lives (Schneider & Jackson, 2000).

THE MYTH OF "PLAYFUL" DRAMATIC ACTIVITIES

Teachers need to be aware of that being fun, interesting, and entertaining is only one dimension of drama and theatre, which provides children with strong incentives to learn and to discover. As McMaster (1998) advocated, drama can be an invaluable teaching method, since it supports every aspect of literacy development. From developing their decoding knowledge, fluency, vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and metacognitive knowledge to comprehension of extended texts, drama and theatre in many ways educate children as a whole, and they offer children a more free and flexible space in which to grow and to learn.

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