Integrated Arts Approaches in Education: Dramatic Arts as a Mediator for Literacy Learning

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Abstract

This paper provides integrated arts resources for working with students in the areas of dramatic arts and literacy learning. First, theoretical background on integrated arts approaches in drama and literacy skill learning will be presented. The nexixixixixixixixixixixixixi-4(n)-(

Introduction

Current research on integrated arts approaches (IAA) with young children focuses on theory and rationale for its use (Cornett, 2007; Palsha, 2001; Research Triangle Group, 1998). Arts integration is generally defined as the linking of a content area and an art form; for the purposes of reaching a deeper level of engagement, learning, and reflection than without the art form. In an integrated classroom, students are working "with" the art form and "through" the art form to reach academic, social, and personal goals (Cornett, 2007, p. 13). The use of multiple and diverse materials and methods to teach concepts and skills precipitates reaching and teaching each and every 'whole child' (McGregor, Tate, & Robinson, 1977, p. 16). Additionally, researchers and practitioners of IAA with school age students identify the need to assess the impact arts experiences on students' developmental and achievement skills (Mason, Steedly, & Thormann, 2008). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to review information for working with students with diverse needs (developmental and linguistic) in dramatic arts settings to foster literacy learning, and to identify next steps for research and practice.

Drama in Education

Drama in education has been recognized as a dynamic methodology for teaching throughout the world, particularly in Canada, England, Ireland, and Australia. Fisher and Williams (2000, p. vii) state that "learning to be literate begins with speaking and listening; speech enables us to describe the world while written speech has a separate linguistic function – to sustain and order our thinking." Yet, many students struggle with these sophisticated developmental processes and require an explicit, engaging, and holistic approach to learning. Drama in education is the use of drama conventions to

reach educational objectives, brings students into an “as if” world where actions and consequences matter (Heathcote, 1995).

Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore, shape, and communicate their understandings using dramatic elements including: voice, body, and imagination. Margaret Meek (as cited in Wilhelm, 2002, p. 10) states that “drama strategies make public the secret things that expert readers know and do so that these usually invisible strategies will be made physical, external, and concrete.” Process drama is the exploration of a pre-text (story, current event, poem, picture, etc.) through carefully crafted dramatic episodes, providing a rich context for students to experience, shape and reflect on their ideas (O’Neill, 1995). Process drama deepens engagement and ultimately understanding through fictional episodes where “time” is slowed down and tension increased. As the focus intensifies, students manifest a variety of roles and attitudes that allow them to understand and make critical inferences and deductions. Students have an ongoing opportunity to execute and refine critical literacy skills (comprehension and production of complex thoughts and ideas) through process drama (Fisher & Williams, 2000).

Rationale for Connecting Drama and Literacy Skill Learning

For students with disabilities, literacy skill learning (oral and written comprehension and expression) is an area of considerable need. Students with diverse learning needs may struggle with understanding and/or producing language, which impacts their ability to use written language (receptively or expressively). Students from under resourced environments typically have compromised or limited access to literacy learning. Students with diverse language backgrounds have confounds with literacy skill

drama are similar to those for reading comprehension. Sun (2003) notes that in both circumstances, students are decoding symbols; they shape ideas based on purpose and audience, finding meaning, and constructing language. Students also retain and internalize new understandings through drama as the representations of ideas and feelings are constructed through the use of the 'whole body'. It is important to note that students engaged in drama reconstruct prior knowledge schemas to form increasingly sophisticated and complex understandings of ideas and events. Students also experiment with multiple forms of literacy (listening, speaking, reading, writing) while developing a variety of registers and levels of language according to the demands of the dramatic context.

Language, Cognition, and Social Development Theories

Theoretical background and rationale of using dramatic arts approaches for teaching literacy skills to students with diverse needs is based on language, cognition, and social/emotional development theories. Cognitive and linguistic theories of development establish the significance of linguistic specificity and its contribution to children's development of cognitive and social communication skills. These perspectives include children's activities in symbolic representation, assimilation and accommodation, schema formation, and social participation, all of which influence their linguistic, cognitive, and social skill development, and their development of literate language, or linguistic specificity.

Piagetian theory. A Piagetian perspective on children's cognitive and linguistic skill development emphasizes the role of mental representation. Children's shift from symbolic to ideational forms of representation through language use is closely

constructive or solitary object play (Culatta, 1994; Pellegrini, Galda, Bartini, & Charak, 1998). Van Oers (1998) suggests that children's linguistic specificity might be linked to their development of meaningful abstract thinking or the ability to recontextualize previously experienced events, since they can describe temporal and sequential information through features such as conjunctive phrases.

Schema theory. Schema theory informs the current discussion of linguistic specificity and representational forms, with respect to children's development of linguistic and cognitive structures. Schemata are the underlying cognitive and linguistic structures that children develop as they progress from concrete operational thought to formal operational thought. For instance, during concrete operational stages of schema development, children use labels and references, and their utterances contain simple noun- and verb-phrases. As children progress to the formal operational stages of causal reasoning, their utterances become more specific and include linguistic features such as conjunctive phrases and as well as elaborated noun- and verb-phrases. In this way,

Script theory. Script theory, a variation of schema theory informs children's development of linguistic specificity and is relevant to dramatic arts. Script theorists suggest that children's mental schemata are, in fact, a repertoire of linguistic scripts with particular features (Schank & Abelson, 1977). As children experience events, they develop increasingly specific and complex linguistic structures, and in turn, increasingly complex and elaborated scripts.

Vygotskian Theory

Children experience and use increasingly specific and complex language features through their symbolic interactions. Vygotsky (1978) states that children develop in linguistic, cognitive, and social domains through their interaction with their environment. Children's optimal learning environment, known as their zone of proximal development (ZPD) is characterized by the input they receive as being at or above their own ability level. Pellegrini's (1985) model is an application of Vygotskian social interaction theory in explaining how children come to use specific language to meet the demands of their environment. Pellegrini characterizes children's specific language use as their linguistic resolution between two opposing forces of "wish fulfillment (e.g., fantasy) and rule-

contexts with peers. Thus, children's specific language use supports their symbolic interactions and is linked to concrete objects in the environment, as well as to more abstract and socially mediated symbols.

Social-cognitive perspective informs specific language use in dramatic arts contexts for children with and without disabilities. This perspective draws on Vygotskian theory to illustrate how children's language use is related to their development of social skills (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983; Smilansky, 1968). The Smilansky-Parten Matrix illustrates the relationship between children's development of social and language skills. Rubin and colleagues' (1983) apply Smilansky's (1968) play contexts (e.g., functional/preoperational, constructive, dramatic/symbolic) and Parten's (1932) continuum of social participation (i.e., solitary, parallel, and interactive) to characterize relationships among linguistic, social, and play factors in early childhood. Pellegrini (1985), and Pellegrini and Galda (1998, p. 60) apply Rubin et al.'s (1983) model to explain the relationship between specific language use and various play contexts, in which language use in the play context of dramatic/symbolic play is most highly associated with the interactive type of social participation, as compared to parallel or solitary types of social participation, which are not associated with specific language use.

Review of Methods and Materials

Language-Based Intervention Methods for Studying Linguistic Specificity

Researchers have assessed children's linguistic specificity through oral literate language, which comprises elaborated noun phrases, mental and linguistic verbs, conjunctions, and adverbs (Anderson, 2010; Justice & Kaderavek, 2004; Westby, 1985;

1994). These authors demonstrate that literate language is a measurable aspect of preschool age children's language production. Also, differences in production of literate language have been found among preschool and school-age populations with and without disabilities (Anderson, 2010; Greenhalgh, 1999; Greenhalgh & Strong, 2001). An important aspect of literate language use is that it is related to children's first experiences with relaying information in contexts such as story and event retelling. This has relevance when considering how dramatic arts activities mediate language production in children.

Play contexts. Pellegrini (1985) uses specific literate language features as the outcome measure to assess linguistic specificity in preschoolers' dyadic conversations. Pellegrini categorizes play contexts based on the structure and function of language used by participants; this matrix of play categories serves as a set of predictor variables for frequency of literate language use, on dimensions of (a) conjunctions (temporal and causal); (b) noun phrases; (c) reference (endophora and exophora); and (d) verbs. In this study, Pellegrini reports consistently high correlations (.62 to .93) between play categories of symbolic play and literate language use among preschool dyads. Other descriptive findings support the preliminary research on literate language in dramatic and symbolic play contexts. Sachs, Goldman, and Chaille (1985) report that preschool age children engaged in dyadic play with a set of pretend doctor toys produce higher rates of specific vocabulary (medical terms and functions) as compared to non-thematic play, such as construction or block-building.

Language Intervention Research

Language intervention research with children having language and developmental disabilities typically involves targeting functional language goals in conversational play contexts (Nathan, 2002; Raab & Carl, 2004; Smith et al., 2004; Warren & Yoder, 2004). Intervention studies involve children's specific language feature use during play contexts in home- and clinic-based settings. Findings indicate that factors such as facilitation technique (i.e., direct or indirect), interaction partner (parent or clinician), and setting (e.g., clinic, home, or preschool) are important considerations to the efficacy of language interventions with young children (e.g., Smith et al., 2004).

Dramatic play and linguistic specificity. McKeough (1984) examines the effects of sociodramatic play on linguistic specificity of children with disabilities in dramatic play. McKeough reports significant correlations between dramatic play enactments and children's use of linguistically specific features with groups of children, ranging in age from 4 to 10 years old. The findings indicate that the combination of dramatic play and narrative retelling consistently results in higher rates of literate language use (conjunction and mental-linguistic verbs) across both language ability and age groups of children than either context by itself.

Drama and social communication. Other research aimed at social communication involved data collection via observations, interviews, and collaboratively created and performed artwork with middle and high school age students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Schieman & Nichols, 2010). The methodology was "a/r/tographic", in which the authors acted as artists, researchers, and teachers throughout the study (Leavy, 2008). Participants in the week-long drama program included 29 adolescent campers who with ASD and 18 adolescent camp counselors. The authors reported

robust gains in participants' social communication understanding and concept development. A similar effect of drama was observed in gains of elementary age students with learning disabilities engaged in a creative drama program, which led to increased social and oral expressive language skills (de la Cruz, 1995).

Drama and literacy skills and attitudes. Krakaur (2005) conducted a mixed method study of process drama to teach literacy skills to seventh grade students with disabilities. Reading attitude surveys, interviews, and observation data were collected to identify changes in reading comprehension, written language, and motivation among students. Process drama was implemented as a central instructional device for a three month literature unit in which the study occurred. Using Heathcote's (as cited in Wagner, 1999) "mantle of the expert" approach, students were placed in roles as documentarians to create a film. As students moved in and out of the dramatic world, they engaged in multiple forms of literacy (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Students increased in their self-reported attitudes toward literacy, as well as in their performance on standardized reading and criterion-based written language assessments.

Review of the Literature on Drama in Education

Catterall's review of the research on drama in education reveals important aspects about the state of what is known about its effects in education. The criterion for studies to be included in the review was that individuals adopted roles (i.e., characters other than themselves), with drama broadly defined by the unifying characteristic of the adoption of character roles by learners. The studies involved portraying a character from children's literature; other roles emerged from fantasy and pretend play with adult

prompting. Most research had groups of children enacting scenarios or completing stories, with and without advance planning, concentrating on early childhood and elementary age populations. Drama was found to influence literacy outcomes focused on narrative understanding and comprehension (e.g., Dupont, 1992; Pellegrini & Galda, 1982; Page, 1983; Parks & Rose, 1997; Williamson & Silvern, 1992). Other studies found effects of “thought organizing’ drama, narrative, and fantasy play activities on written expression (Moore & Caldwell, 1993; Pellegrini, 1980; Wagner, 1986).

Barriers and Facilitators

Barriers

Barriers to using dramatic arts to teach literacy skills include the primary focus on rudimentary tasks, rather than complex and deeply engaging ideas. This issue is precipitated by the focus on teaching and reaching standardized benchmarks, which prevents much of the engagement through IAA from occurring (Gulatt, 2008). As several studies note, IAA’s role in school curriculum increases student achievement (e.g., Deasy, 2002; Eisner, 199800030053>982(isne)e

dynamics, teachers must be able to reflect and process these shifts (McGregor et al., 1977). For example, children, either on their own or w

interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation (Center for Applied Special Technologies, 2010).

Eisner (2000) maintains that “the limits of language do not determine the limits of our thinking.” Students with diverse learning needs deserve unlimited approaches to facilitate expression of their ideas. The mediation of specific literate language through representational forms such as drama provides access and the opportunity for these students to participate and progress in literacy skill learning. Drama is well-positioned to play a pivotal role in teaching and learning as educators aim to foster students’ processing of thought and language in as full, complex, and sensitive ways as possible, with the goal of conveying information through spoken and written word (i.e., literacy skills). This statement reflects an individual’s entire experience and at the same time orders it and relates it to other knowledge, which is a goal worthy of any educational endeavor (Wagner, 1999).

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