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What students think about drama in education

Joanne M. Parke

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SUBJECT HEADINGS (Choose 5 key words or phrases by which a reader could find your thesis)

- 1) Student Interviews on Drama in Education
- 2) Pilot Program in Drama/Theater
- 3) Observations of the 6th Grade Drama Class
- 4) Student Views of Drama Skills
- 5) Creatively, Gifted Drama Class

ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS): An ethnographic study of five creatively, gifted students and their responses to a summer school drama, pilot program. Responses observed, written, and oral were direct and insightful. Elements, principles, tools, skills, and uniquenesses of drama education were discussed. Student interviews compared application, synthesis, and evaluation of the skills and objectives taught during the pilot program. Depth of connections in reading, speaking, and "real world" applications proved enlightening. Student sample writings are included.

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What Students Think about Drama in Education

by

Joanne Parke

Honors Capstone/Independent Study

CIEE 497 Fall 1991

Instructor: Dr. P. Farris

August 20, 1991

Language," and others, it occurred to me that as early as 1976, Bolten and Heathcote set about the task of convincing educators to incorporate drama in the elementary school classroom as a learning tool. (Wagner, 1979). Their educational premise was steeped in process orientation. Drama/theater education is rooted in the universal human impulse to play, to imagine, imitate, and to enact, which draws children naturally to enjoy doing drama/theater. The process-centered drama, and the audience-centered theater share both the tools of the body, mind, and voice, and the processes of perceiving, responding, imagining, creating, communicating, and evaluating. (ISBE, 1987) Research confirms Bloom's higher levels of thinking are met again and again within the subject area of drama/theater. (1956) The five main characteristics of drama/theater that make it a unique and exciting art form are:

- 1) Action using the tools of drama in an imagined world.
- 2) Collaboration using cooperation among actors
- 3) Temporal in that the event only takes place within a certain timeframe and that no two performances are alike.
- 4) Interaction, in that actors as have a shared presence with other actors and the audience and/or classmates for communication.
- 5) Composite because it links various art forms such as literature, visual arts, music, and dance. (ISBE, 1987).

Because the legislative requirements, additional research, and basic educational philosophies are met within the art form of drama/theater, one more logical reason to use drama in the classroom was left unexamined. I decided it was time to ask the students what they thought about drama and what they learned. Acting as an assistant/interviewer/observer my goals were to find out what students thought about drama and how it could help them in the regular classroom. The drama class consisted of two adults, the drama instructor and myself. Often, collaboratively, we were both acting as instructor/assistant/director/actor/audience, implementing the state goals for learning in drama. The tools of mind, body, and voice were taught to the students to help them understand, and demonstrate the principles and elements of drama/theater. The sensory principle of movement and sound; the formal principles of language; the technical principles of playwriting, acting, and directing; and the expressive element of emotion, mood, and dynamics were incorporated into the teacher-made curriculum. (R. Zemke, personal communication, July 1, 1991). Goals incorporated into activities, games, and mind-stretching exercises (as well as physically motivating exercises) covered all three of Bloom's cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. (McClaslin, 1990; Novelly, 1985; Salsbury, 1986; Spolin, 1986). Emphasized areas of drama/theater were readers theater, improvisation, and pantomime in a whole class, small group or individual setting. The responses of the class as a whole, and the five students in particular, after about three days showed pure, unadulterated enjoyment.

When I introduced myself to the students and tried to explain my purpose for interviewing and observing them I said, "Many teachers spend a lot of time trying to find out how to help kids learn. They read, research, test, and observe kids. I thought I'd just ask you what you think and feel about drama, and how it will help you learn more here, and in your regular classroom in the future."

Ruth Wright, Director of Gifted Education in School District #64 described the reflective nature of the gifted student, along with the social, emotional, and creative abilities of these students, in particular, as giving interviews that would be enlightening. (R. Wright, personal communication, February, 1991). During the three week session, I asked the five students several oral questions, and sent them home with written questions. Both sets of questions were written exactly the same on the first day and seventh day of the fifteen day session. Final questions, on day fourteen, asked student's feelings and thoughts on specific skill areas and general objectives.

Kurt

Kurt's interview was insightful. I observed him to be somewhat elusive the first day as most of the sixth graders were. With several ice breaking games that dealt with cooperation and collaboration, he answered my oral question "Do you think there are some things about drama that can help you in school, and what are they? He replied, "Yea, reading with expression." As each student responded with this pat answer, I recalled the major emphasis of the first day's lesson was on readers theater. Consequently, I found these answers quite reflective. Readers theater is where actors sit or stand, and read script using facial expression, gestures, body position, voice pitch, and variance of speed and/or volume, but the emphasis is not in memorizing lines. It is in the expressive element of emotion, mood, and dynamics that true meaning of content is instantly achieved, and with the practice of read text is interpreted further. (O'Neil, 1989). I asked Kurt how reading with expression could help him, he said he would have, "...no fear." On our second interview he stated, "It [drama] could help me not be nervous, shy, and not quiet, but louder." He also relayed most people thought he was quiet except his mom, who knew he wasn't because he always yelled at his sister. When I asked him how that could help him he said, "I can be more outgoing, then I can make more friends." On his first set of written questions my statement,

"Because of this class . . .," he wrote, "...I'm better at getting up in front of an audience." As the weeks progressed I observed Kurt went from a quiet, reserved, somewhat elusive young black student to a leader who was proficient in collaboration and humor. I wrote, "Cooperation is a major part of drama because . . .," he added, "...it takes more than one person to make things right." His ability to take on a character he liked, and remain there (called characterization) he later marked as his favorite skill. When I asked why, he wrote, "...because I like portraying other people." On a list of skills he indicated increased concentration would help him in the future because, "...it will help me in my basketball skills." This real world application to learning drama not only shows the reflective association that connects new knowledge to previous knowledge, but also shows a application and synthesis, of his skills in drama. (Rosenburg, 1987).

Anthony

Anthony said the first day of drama class was, "...good, because of the variety." When I asked him on the seventh day, what he liked best about today he said, "...performing to everyone." And, when I asked him what he liked best about this drama class in general, he said, "...the experience, it's fun, the audience, and the enthusiasm." It was easy to see why Anthony liked the enthusiasm

because he was enthusiastic and as energetic about the class as anyone could get. I watched him walk with a bounce in his step and a smile on his face everyday. When I asked him on this same oral interview, «Do you think there are some things about drama that can help you in school?» He said, «Yea, improvisation. It can help me get going better, like if I walk in my class in the middle of something I can catch on quicker.» As a way of getting away from some of the types of surface, pat answers students know teachers like to hear, the first written question read, "If a friend wanted to be in the Summer School Drama Program, I would tell him..." Anthony wrote, "...be in! DEFINITELY, because you learn a lot in the class! This class has been UNBELIEVABLE!" Later in the questionnaire I wrote, "On a scale of 1-5 with a 1 being 'not good' and a 5 being 'great,' I would rate today a _____. This program a _____. That day Anthony rated a "4", and the program a "5 DEFINITELY!"« At first a concern about the students honesty and ability to relate their true feelings about the drama program, and practical applications to regular school (especially to a teacher/assistant figure) bothered me, but anytime students use their own vernacular the statements are believable. On a final questionnaire I asked Anthony to write the answer to, "What do costumes do for you characterization?" He answered, "It makes me get into my character more.« "Getting into character," is what transforms the written word to experience for the student, and what helps the student make the giant leap from the abstraction of

reading about someone's (or something's) feelings to actually experiencing it in some universal theme. (Bolten, 1979; Morgan, 1988; Nelson, 1988; Rosenberg, 1987; Tway, 1988; Wagner, 1976, 1988).

Kyle

Kyle was a good student who tried hard, but was extremely quiet. To be in this class stretched him. Characteristics in his favor
~J~a ~ quick wit and the instantaneous problem solving ability,
,/ necessary for good group and individual improvisation. On the first day oral interview I asked Kyle, "What are some things about drama that can help you in school? How and Why?" He replied, "...reading social studies, and science and stuff, by improving your voice and being able to answer questions better." On the seventh day oral interview I asked Kyle what he liked best about the drama class. He stated, "...improvisation, because you get to use spur of the moment ideas." Kyle seemed to work at overcoming his shyness through pantomime. In pantomime he was able to concentrate on timing, and humor without oral speech. This gave him the confidence to become better at all the skills taught in the drama workshop. On a written interview I asked him, "Which do you like better readers theater, improvisation, or pantomime? Why?" He answered, "...improvisation,

I like to be on my feet and quick thinking." On a list of skills learned or improved in drama class, Kyle circled timing and listening as his favorite. When asked why, he answered, "If you use that skill right you can make people laugh." An appreciation of his dry humor, high level thinking skills, and clever, witty contrasts, exposed a student whose gifts might be easily overlooked in the regular classroom. He reminded me that humor provides the essential respite from the doldrums school can sometimes bring. A final fill in the blank question read, "It's hard to participate [in drama] all the time because ...," he filled in, "...your concentration level is always different." The message here is one teachers know, but often fail to recognize. Time on task goes in and out, up and down, for most students. Even the fun, different, and exciting drama class, had its moments of lack of concentration for Kyle, and everyone else. Human nature plays a enormous part in education and brings out the truth about learning.

Dana

Dana was a proficient student at creating a storyline in improvisation, and pantomime. Creativity was one of her outstanding strengths. She was often able to master a character with a dialect, one of the characteristics of a creatively, gifted drama student. The more challenging the improvisation assignment, the more effort, growth and response she gave. Her quality of work improved steadily along with her skills. Her refinements in eye contact with audience

members, and maximum cooperation (inspite of the undesirable, assigned characters) showed her steady improvement. Considering the developmental stages of children, the 6th/7th grader has a personal image of great depth and dimension. (Piaget, 1962). Going outside of that dimension not only causes anxiety for the student, it can also cause frustration for the teacher. However, in drama students are more apt to venture out because:

- 1) Peers are also acting differently
- 2) There is an aura of play to drama which in the classroom can break down "cool" boundary.
- 3) After taking the risk, and being successful, students have courage to continue, experiment, and improve in the areas of creativity.

Drama offers a safe place to learn, have fun, and do very different things. When I asked Dana on interview one, what she liked about performing she said, "It's really drama and being dramatic." On interview two on the same question she replied, "[I like watching] the audience. I like watching their faces and reactions." On the next question I asked her how this could help her in school she said, "I won't be afraid of the audience. I can use my skills and speak clearly. Mostly I can improve." On the third written interview I gave the students a list of skills they learned. Directions were as follows:

Circle your favorite skill.

Underline the skill that will be most useful to you now.

Star the skill that will be most useful to you in the future.

X ~kill you don't like at all.

(A skill may have more than one symbol. Be Critical!)

Example: * Reading--Why? Because I will understand what I read better.

Dana's partial list read like this:

Voice Clarity-- Why? School

Voice Projection-- Why? School

Increased concentration--Why? School

Acting out skits--Why? I like memorizing things

Rehearsal--Wh~fit .eem~rofe . ••ional

X*Relaxation--WhY~ might be under stress from work.

I was sure Dana had the essence of the drama class objectives when she answered the fill-in statement, "Cooperation is a major part of drama because . . .," she responded, "--- you can't do ANYTHING at all without it." Under additional comments Dana wrote, "I LOVE this program." And later, "EVERYTHING was fun, fun, fun!"

Tammy

Tammy had an eye on the future. The characteristics of a gifted interpersonal, and intrapersonal perspective was evident in many of these student~however, of the five Tammy gave me the greatest

insight. (R. Wright, personal communication August 14, 1991). I stated, "If a friend wanted to be in the Summer School Drama Program, I would tell him ___ • Why?" She wrote, "...join! I like drama, and acting, because you get to show a part of yourself that no one has seen before and someone else might feel the same way, so they should join." On the day of my second interview, which was in the middle of the program, we had been working on improvisatory skits that were given to small groups, and individuals. I asked Tammy how she liked the techniques she learned that day and why? She said, "...good, because you can use that in business, in interviews and stuff." When I asked Tammy how could drama help her in school she said, "...it could help in oral reports by speaking on the subject to the audience." She later stated she could memorize parts better and, "...have no fear of oral reports and stuff." This she said, "... it would give her better grades and more self-confidence." On the second interview I asked the students to fill in what they needed to work on for tomorrow, and to state some ways they could work on, or practice their skills. Tammy wrote, "I need to pay attention to who my character is [or who] I'm acting as [by] trying to relate to his or her feelings."

At the end of the program on the "list of skills you learned," here are Tammy's responses: (See Sample 1).

Name ~~Sample~~

Here is a list of skills you learned:

○ Circle your favorite skill.

⊖ Underline the skill that will be most useful to you now.

* Star the skill that will be most useful to you in the future.

X the skill you don't like at all.

(A skill may have more than one symbol. Be critical.)

Ex. * reading - why? because I will understand what I read better.

- * imagining why? get into the character better
 - X pantomime why? I don't think it will help.
 - * voice clarity why? same.
 - * voice projection why? school reports, job interviews
 - increased concentration why? school work
 - * observation why? school, future jobs
 - * acting out skits why? get rid of stage fright
 - * rehearsal why? so you'll do your part well
 - * characterization why? if in important play
 - * visualization why? if you're famous
 - relaxation why? help calm down
 - * storytelling why? read to kids
 - voice rate why? helpful in library ect
 - X expression (facial) why? same.
 - X expression (voice) why? I don't think it will over why???
- me very much

- * Texture Why? make friends
- * being creative why? Art, job
- * appreciating being creative why? Teacher's praising
boss will give you a raise
- appreciating acting why? I really don't know
- * self evaluation why? appreciate everyone
even if ^{criticism} there not the same as you are
- evaluation of group why? include everyone
in: group discussion, games ect
- * timing and listening why? help you understand
more about what your doing.

Cooperation is a major part of drama because
of we all work together will
do it right but if one chooses not
to it messes the whole thing up.

It's hard to participate all the time because
some times some of the stuff we do is
stupid and unmeaningful to me.

1) Do these questions separately. Please:

On a separate sheet of paper disguise your handwriting
and tell what you really think of this class. Tell good things
and bad things. Do NOT SIGN but please be specific &
Give examples.

2) What did you learn about drama/theater in this class?

On the last interview I asked the students, "If you were a teacher in a regular classroom, in what subjects would you use drama? Why? How?" She wrote, "...probably in each subject. You need to pay attention and understand what your doing in both school and drama."

Combinations

All of the students answered the written question, "Since you've been in drama class, will you go out for more plays?" with answers ranging from, "...absolutely" to "...definitely." All students said reading with expression, and speaking in front of an audience were the two most useful skills they gained. While in "real world" classrooms this may seem like a pat, and somewhat trite answer for children of such creativity and depth, one must remember they are still a product of their educational system. In the regular classroom throughout the K-6 years, emphasis is on reading. Upon further examination, reading with expression brings students to the instantaneous, higher level of comprehension. (Bloom, 1956). Within the structure of the expression is evaluation of the characters feelings. This allows the student to cross the bridge from the concrete, over the boundary of the abstraction of feelings and thoughts, to an interpersonal perspective, and finally an intrapersonal perspective. (Piaget, 1962; R. Wright, personal communication, Aug. 14, 1991).

Evaluations

All the students always clearly stated what they needed to work on for the next day. Answers on how they could work on skills ranged from practicing in the mirror, to creating skits and plays at home for family and friends. All students enjoyed seeing themselves on video tape. Skills that may go unnoticed as a performer, but become obvious as an audience member, made it easy for students to participate in the critical part of the drama/theater curriculum. Students were permitted to criticize themselves on all performances, as a method of self-evaluation. The drama instructor and I could also add constructive criticism, as well. The remaining group, however, was confined to only positive statements about any other person's performance. This created an atmosphere of acceptance and increased cooperation, in the long run. Students never balked at who was in their group or what they had to do. No matter how dumb their part seemed, or how they may have disliked the person assigned to their group, it was difficult for anyone to exhibit ostracism to another group member, since they just found something positive about what he or she had just done. Consequently, each student could freely take the risk without negative peer pressure. A simply marvelous time was had by all. Humor played an important role in the drama class, and was the higher level mainstay of the group as a whole. While the relaxation techniques practiced in class were listed as the least favorite activities, four out of the five students understood its value in the class. (Salisbury, 1986).

The day before our culminating "Informance/Performance" presentation for parents, family, and friends, I asked the students to write two essay questions. The directions read as follows:

- 1} On a separate sheet of paper disguise your handwriting and tell what you really think of this class. Tell good things and bad things. DO NOT SIGN, but please be specific and give examples.
- 2} What did you learn about drama/theater in this class?

Answers read as follows:

(See samples 2-6)

Conclusions

While the pacing of the holistic, creative drama student was upscaled, and interpersonal and intrapersonal perspectives of students were presented often, the classroom procedures of introduction of materials, practice of skills learned, and mastery of skills were the same as in a regular classroom. Whether in a small group, large group, or individual setting, evaluation and review were constant in the class. What was different was the energy expressed by the students. The specificity of the answers of the five students, and the depth of their connections to reading, speaking, and "real world" applications in school (and outside of school) depicted the higher levels of thinking not often seen, but often strived for in any classroom. The regular classroom, as well as special class~n benefit greatly from the message these students bring. Isn't it time we listene~

Sample 2

UJr~ C-|,-~15;u (u.0) (v... , , f."k jlfro~~b"
-l~ ~\~1~'~<5 ~t C,-,~ .avl. ~ ~
y--o:~ \d--~'J' JK,- O'''S-11:'''5 :t 10;''' LI<x :
j -t, '''3) v:Q ~U-



This class has taught me about
projection, was to be clear & he
taught me to mine and improvise.
This class has also given me new games.

Sample 4

- 1) I think this class is very fun. I'd love to be an actor one day but I really don't think acting is for me. Most of this class is fun except the part where I get stinky parts in a skit or play, the rest of it is pure fun.
- 2) I learned that drama can be enjoyed any where, in the home, school, library, concert, but most of all I learned that even if you stick out like a sore thumb in a play just try your best and the show must go on.

Sample 5

1. I think this class is the best thing that ever happened to me. I LOVE IT.
2. In drama, I learned that cooperation is ~~was~~ an essential factor because nothing can be ~~accomplished~~ accomplished without it. Something I learned about drama theater is what what I should & shouldn't do in front of an audience. (Up stage hand, pull back, etc.)

Sample 6

① I liked the drama class a lot because
it was exciting & challenging. I also met
a lot of friends. I had a lot of fun. If I
could, I would like to be a professional actor.
I would like to be a professional actor.

② I learned a lot of things, like acting, improvisation, and teamwork.

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