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Drama-based interventions and narrative

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This chapter identifies four general types of drama-based interventions designed to promote young children’s narrative development: play-training interventions, writing-improvement interventions, Paley-paradigm interventions and readers-theatre interventions. These diverse interdisciplinary interventions were designed to foster a variety of narrative outcomes, such as the production, comprehension and/or recall of either oral or written narratives. The merits and challenges of the research on drama-based narrative interventions, and the potential these interventions hold for supporting young children’s acquisition of narrative skills and influencing early childhood education curricula, are discussed.

This chapter focuses on drama-based interventions designed to promote narrative development in young children. Although narratives can be defined in many ways (McCabe, 1991), an investigation of drama-based interventions requires a broad definition, such as Hicks’s (1991) definition of narrative discourse as ‘the linguistic means through which speakers represent both real-life and fictional events’ (p. 55). To represent the diversity in the literature, an effort was made to discuss all interventions that employed adult-facilitated drama or theatre activities to foster young children’s narrative skills. The drama interventions described in this chapter focus on a variety of narrative outcomes, such as the production, comprehension and/or recall of either oral or written narratives. In addition, there is diversity in the types of drama interventions designed to foster narrative development in young learners. These interventions can be categorized under four general headings: play-training interventions, writing-improvement interventions, Paley-paradigm interventions and readers-theatre interventions.

Children’s language development (Snow et al., 1998) and narrative skills (DeTemple and Tabors, 1996), such as storytelling and story comprehension, have been linked to scholastic success. Peterson and McCabe (1994) noted ‘the ability to produce decontextualized language is a crucial skill underlying literacy acquisition’ (p. 937). The research suggests that for children to succeed in school, they must learn to tell a story, or relate a series of events, that can be understood by listeners who were not present when the events took place. Yet, Paris and Paris (2003) found children often begin school unable to create a sufficiently informative
and well-structured narrative. Therefore, it is important to find engaging ways to foster young children’s narrative development.

It is worth noting that children from different cultures or ethnic groups acquire different narrative styles (Blum-Kulka and Snow, 1992; Heath, 1982; Westby, 1985) and a child’s home culture affects his or her familiarity with narrative conventions and forms (Michaels, 1981). When a child’s narrative conventions are similar to those used in school, classroom activities, such as ‘show-and-tell,’ can serve as ‘oral preparation for literacy’ (Michaels, 1981: 423). However, when a child’s narrative style and classroom discourse conventions differ, it can impede a child’s ability to succeed in school (Westby, 1985). Drama curricula may provide an engaging and effective method for educators to support children’s acquisition and development of narrative understanding and production and, specifically, to help children, whose narrative discourse is not typical of academic discourse, add school-style narratives to their repertoire of narrative genres.

Drama practitioners and classroom teachers have developed a variety of drama and theatre forms, including improvisation, theatre games, and other performance activities and conventions (Cooper, 1993, 2009; Heinig, 1992; McCaslin, 1996; Paley, 1981, 1990; Spolin, 1963, 1986; Young and Vardell, 1993). Many of the techniques used in educational drama immerse participants in language-rich environments and many drama strategies incorporate the use of literature, including stories, plays and poems. Although some of the techniques described in the literature involve non-verbal activities, such as pantomime or tableaux, these silent activities are often used to embody ideas and images from literary sources. Thus, drama and theatre participation is often used as a way to enhance and improve literacy learning.

Drama practitioners maintain that drama participation fosters language development (Fox, 1987; Heinig, 1992; McCaslin, 1996; Paley, 1981, 1990). For example, Heinig (1992) contends enacting a story mandates a close examination of the story and its content, which she believes fosters story comprehension skills. Wagner (1988) highlights the similarities between the mental processes used for dramatic play and literacy: both require decontextualized language and narrative sequencing. Similarly, Brown and Pleydell (1999) note language arts and drama use many of the same speaking and listening skills. They also emphasize that children learn language through ‘practice, and drama can create a strong stimulus for the use and practice of language in a natural and spontaneous environment’ (p. 6). Cooper (1993) concurs, noting the dramatization of adult-authored stories ‘provides children with a model of “book language” and story form’ (p. 56). In sum, educators and researchers believe drama participation provides a language-rich environment and enacting stories can help children develop an understanding of story structure and content. Moreover, they believe drama participation offers an introduction to forms and functions of narrative discourse, while it motivates and engages children in language and literacy-related behaviours (Cooper, 2005; Cremin et al., n.d.; Martinez et al., 1998/1999; McCaslin, 1996; Nicolopoulou, 2002).

‘Educational systems concerned with accountability need research to validate the claims of the beneficial effects of creative drama’ (Vitz, 1983: 17). Although scholars have noted flaws in some of the drama research, findings from the extant research suggest that early childhood drama participation promotes language development (Conard, 1998; Kardash and Wright, 1987; Mages, 2008; Miller and Mason, 1983; Nicolopoulou, 2002; Podlozny, 2000; Vitz, 1983; Wagner, 1998). Specifically, the literature provides evidence that drama participation positively affects children’s language acquisition, story comprehension, story production, story recall, story retelling and story writing, as well as the listening and speaking skills of English-language learners (Brady and Millard, 2012; Greenfader and Brouillette, 2013; Keehn, 2003; Mages, 2008; Moore and Caldwell, 1990, 1993; Nicolopoulou et al., 2006).
Meta-analyses have confirmed drama’s positive effect on children’s language development. In a meta-analysis investigating the link between drama participation and language development, Podlozny (2000) found evidence to suggest drama facilitates story understanding, story recall, oral language development and writing achievement. A more recent meta-analysis (Lee et al., 2015), investigating the effect of ‘drama-based pedagogy’ (DBP) on a variety of outcomes, found DBP had a positive effect on English language arts. Earlier meta-analyses (Conard, 1992; Kardash and Wright, 1987) also indicated drama had a positive effect on children’s language development. If, as the research literature suggests, drama can improve children’s language skills, then it seems to follow that drama participation could be an effective strategy to promote children’s narrative development.

**Play-training interventions**

Many of the early studies of the effect of drama on language development were designed to investigate whether engaging in the language-rich environment and linguistic interactions of dramatic play could increase the sophistication of young children’s language skills. Some of these studies invited children to enact a theme, such as a trip to a fast-food restaurant (Dansky, 1980) or animals in the jungle (Shmukler and Naveh, 1984–1985), and some invited children to re-enact a structured story or folk tale (Pellegrini and Galda, 1982; Saltz et al., 1977; Shmukler and Naveh, 1984–1985; Silvern, 1980). Using various measures to evaluate aspects of narrative skill, including criterion referenced tests, open-ended questions, Cloze tests, picture sequencing tasks and retell tasks, this body of research, as a whole, indicates drama participation is an effective way to foster narrative development for some or all of the participants (Mages, 2008). For example, Saltz and Johnson (1974) found drama affected preschoolers’ story-sequencing and storytelling skills and Pellegrini and Galda (1982) found drama positively affected the story-comprehension skills of kindergarteners and first graders, but did not make a statistically significant difference for second graders. Although, Pellegrini and Galda’s quantitative analyses did not provide evidence that drama significantly improved the narratives of second graders, Galda (1982) noticed qualitative differences; second graders in the drama treatment ‘used a more dramatic tone, included more details, and recreated the conversation between characters’ (Galda, 1982: 54). Play-training studies once constituted an active and productive line of research. Yet, in recent years, few if any studies have focused on this type of drama intervention.

Although not designed as a play-training study, Nielson (1993) conducted a study using similar methods. Nielson investigated children’s understanding of stories when a read-aloud was accompanied by one of four activities: drawing, discussion, drama (retelling the story with puppets and reenacting the story) or identification of print features. Nielson found low-achieving kindergarteners in the drama group did significantly better than low-achieving children in the other groups; she found no effect of condition for middle- or high-achieving children.

**Writing-improvement interventions**

Although similar to play-training studies, writing-improvement studies are concerned with promoting narrative writing and tend to focus on children in the primary grades. Moore and Caldwell (1990, 1993) studied the effect of drama on the writing skills of second and third graders. Their research, which compared the effects of three pre-writing activities – drama, drawing or discussion – on students’ writing, found no significant difference between the
drama and drawing conditions, but found these conditions each provided significantly better support for writing than traditional discussions (Moore and Caldwell, 1993). Moore and Caldwell (1990, 1993) concluded that different media or modes of preparation differently affected children’s narrative performance.

A more recent study by Brady and Millard (2012) combined technology with drama to improve children’s story writing skills. This intervention included a DVD of videos featuring a male storyteller narrating stories. According to Brady and Millard (2012), the limited view of the storyteller in the videos, framed to include only the storyteller’s head and shoulders, helped focus children’s attention on the teller’s voice and facial expressions and on the language of the narratives. Video viewing was combined with drama, role-play and oral storytelling workshops designed to engage seven- to nine-year-olds in key aspects of narrative. Comparing samples of children’s pre-intervention writing to their post-intervention writing, the researchers found ‘a marked change’, noting improvement in the children’s narrative skills, including their ability to use temporal connections, complex sentences, literary language and story sequencing. They found the combination of the storytelling videos, drama strategies, role-play workshops and oral storytelling sessions had a positive impact on children’s story writing. Brady and Millard (2012) noted that ‘different modes of telling provide different affordances for meaning making and knowledge of this is important in supporting children’s use of narrative elements such as action or character’ (p. 23). Thus, to effectively nurture young learners’ narrative capacities, it would be worthwhile for educators to consider employing multiple modes of representation and engagement.

**Paley-paradigm interventions**

Paley-paradigm interventions combine storytelling with story enactment. Paley (1981), an early childhood educator, developed a curriculum that, in addition to offering children opportunities to dramatize adult-authored stories, encouraged children to dictate their own stories and then enact the stories they created. McNamee and her colleagues (McNamee, 1987; McNamee et al., 1985, 1986) were the first to research the effect of a Paley-style storytelling/story-acting intervention, comparing it to an intervention that only included storytelling. Their study, which included children from three to six years old, found drama positively affected the complexity and coherence of narratives told by the older children (four to six years old), but that drama did not have an effect on the narratives of the youngest group of children. Warash and Workman (1993) also investigated the use of the Paley paradigm with preschoolers and found the children’s stories improved over the course of the intervention.

Fein Ardila-Rey and Groth (2000) conducted a study comparing the effects of the Paley paradigm to the effects of the ‘author’s chair’ on the narrative free-play activities of kindergarteners. All of the children in the study dictated stories; half of the children enacted the stories they wrote and half did not. The ones who did not dramatize the stories participated in the ‘author’s chair’, in which the teacher read a child-authored story to the class, after which the child-author, sitting in the designated author’s chair, responded to classmates’ questions and comments. These researchers found children in the author’s-chair condition gravitated to book-making activities and became interested in book features, such as indices and illustrations. In contrast, children in the drama condition were less interested in making books and focused more on integrating characters and action into their stories. Analyses of the children’s free-play activities revealed narrative and literacy-related activities increased for children in the drama condition, but these activities decreased for children in the author’s-chair condition. Although
the intervention lasted only 12 weeks, the researchers found that after three months the interventions continued to differently affect children’s free play.

Nicolopoulou and her colleagues (Nicolopoulou, 1996, 1997, 2002, 2006; Nicolopoulou et al., 1994; Richner and Nicolopoulou, 2001) have also researched the effect of the Paley paradigm on children’s narrative development. Looking across her studies, which included preschoolers from low-income, middle-income and upper-middle-income families, Nicolopoulou (2002) found participation in a storytelling/story-acting intervention positively affected children’s narrative competence; children who participated in Paley-style drama activities showed improvement in the complexity and sophistication in their narratives. Nicolopoulou attributed the children’s improvement to the dramatization of the stories, which intrinsically provided a multisensory experience that afforded opportunities for children to evaluate the stories they wrote. This opportunity for self-evaluation helped children better understand and produce the features and characteristics of well-written narratives. Nicolopoulou also emphasized that Paley-style dramas, which feature the classroom presentation of enacted child-authored stories, have the potential to harness the positive influences of children’s peer-culture; participation fosters a sense of belonging and inclusion in a community of storytellers and good stories garner peer appreciation. Hence, the classroom culture and children’s desire to participate with others in a story-dramatization motivated and encouraged the creation of interesting well-developed narratives to enact with and for classmates.

In one iteration of Nicolopoulou’s (2006) research, the Paley-style drama curriculum affected the genre of children’s journal entries. Inspired by the storytelling/story-acting paradigm, children began to create story narratives about the pictures they had drawn in their journals. Thus, it seemed children were able to transfer their newly acquired narrative understanding from the storytelling/story-acting context to a new literacy context.

MakeBelieve Arts (2015c), a London-based theatre and education company that provides intervention implementation workshops and teacher professional development, developed ‘Helicopter Stories’ (MakeBelieve Arts, 2015), an intervention that uses techniques based on Paley’s storytelling/story-acting paradigm, and the ‘Helicopter Technique’ (Cremin et al., n.d.: 13), an in-service teacher-training programme designed to help teachers lead the storytelling/story-acting curriculum. In contrast to previous research on Paley-paradigm drama interventions, an evaluation study (Cremin et al., n.d.) of MakeBelieve Arts’ Helicopter Technique could not substantiate claims that participating in an eight-week implementation of Helicopter Stories fostered children’s narrative development. They did find, however, that Helicopter Stories motivated children’s engagement in literacy-related activities. The lack of evidence to support children’s narrative development in this study may be attributable to a relatively short-term intervention.

Until recently, the use of the Paley paradigm had been limited to particular classrooms, particular schools or particularly interested practitioners. In response to the Boston Public Schools’ adoption of the Common Core Standards (2010), the Boston student-outcome data and the desire to help students meet the standards, the Boston Public Schools Department of Early Childhood (n.d.; Mardell, 2013; Sachs et al., 2014) launched The Boston Listens Project, which provides teacher professional development and supports for the implementation of a Paley-paradigm curriculum. Mardell (Sachs et al., 2014) explained that ‘storytelling and story acting provide a rich context for vocabulary development as children listen to and use words in authentic ways’ and dramatizing stories ‘brings words to life’ (p. 176). He elaborated, ‘storytelling and story acting also develop essential narrative abilities; they provide a bridge between the contextualized speech of young children and the decontextualized language of books and writing’ (p. 176). In the pilot season of Boston Listens, approximately
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half of the 165 early childhood educators who had participated in the professional development training programme on the storytelling/story-acting technique attempted to facilitate the Paley paradigm in their classrooms (Sachs et al., 2014). The programme goal was to build on this initial implementation until all 165 teachers incorporated the Paley paradigm into their classroom praxis.

This systematic large-scale implementation of a Paley-paradigm drama intervention is important for a number of reasons. First, it affords a large group of public-school children an opportunity to engage in a curriculum that has often been shown to positively influence language and literacy development. Second, a district-supported programme has the potential to foster teacher collaboratives and learning communities, in which teachers can share successful implementation practices and work together to identify productive ways to address paradigmatic challenges. Nicolopoulou and Cole (2010) found involvement in a learning community can be beneficial for teachers and for the successful implementation and refinement of a storytelling/story-acting curriculum. Finally, the implementation of the Boston Listens Project could provide a rich research opportunity to investigate the effects of a Paley-paradigm drama intervention on children’s language and literacy development within a large urban public school system. It would be particularly valuable if a longitudinal evaluation study, using both quantitative and qualitative measures, could assess child learning outcomes, as well as identify factors that promote or inhibit successful programme implementation.

Readers-theatre interventions

Most drama interventions are designed to engage participants in a multisensory embodied experience. In other words, children are encouraged to use both their voices and their bodies to portray a character in a drama. Readers-theatre interventions differ from the other drama interventions in that the actors rely less on physical gestures and the full embodiment of a character and rely more on using their voices to express the characters’ emotions and intentions and to communicate the message of the story. Worthy and Prater (2002) explained that in readers theatre ‘the focus is on how the participants convey meaning through their interpretive reading’ (p. 294). Similarly, Martinez et al. (1998/1999) noted, ‘The performer’s goal is to read a script aloud effectively, enabling the audience to visualize the action’ (p. 326).

Many proponents of readers theatre relate it to a practice known as ‘repeated reading’ (Martinez et al., 1998/1999; Tsou, 2011; Worthy and Broaddus, 2002; Worthy and Prater, 2002; Young and Rasinski, 2009). The National Reading Panel (2000) found repeated reading to be beneficial for a number of reading outcomes including comprehension. Readers-theatre proponents also maintain that readers theatre provides ‘an authentic communication event’ (Millin and Rinehart, 1999: 72) that motivates readers to want engage in the repeated reading of a text (Keehn, 2003; Martinez et al., 1998/1999; Millin and Rinehart, 1999; Vasinda and McLeod, 2011; Worthy and Prater, 2002; Young and Rasinski, 2009). Although readers theatre is not a new technique, it is often implemented with older students (Griffith and Rasinski, 2004; Tsou, 2011; Young and Vardell, 1993). A number of studies, however, investigated the effect of readers theatre on the narrative comprehension skills of children in the second and third grades.

Martinez et al. (1998/1999) studied the effect of a ten-week readers-theatre intervention on second graders’ reading and found students made measureable gains in reading speed. They also attributed students’ motivation to engage in reading and writing activities to the students’ participation in readers theatre.
Millin and Rinehart (1999) conducted a study of second-grade students from low-income families. Students who participated in the readers-theatre intervention made significantly greater gains in reading comprehension than those who did not participate in readers theatre. Similarly, Keehn (2003) found that readers theatre fostered second graders’ reading fluency and comprehension and was particularly beneficial for students who began the intervention with less proficient reading skills. Interestingly, she found no significant benefits to children’s fluency or comprehension when explicit fluency instruction was added to the readers-theatre curriculum.

Vasinda and McLeod (2011), who modelled their intervention on traditional readers-theatre interventions (Griffith and Rasinski, 2004; Martinez et al., 1998/1999), added a technological component – podcasting – to their readers-theatre intervention with second and third graders. As part of this intervention, students made audio recordings of their readers-theatre performances. These recordings were then uploaded to an internet platform that allowed the performances to be shared with the children’s families. Vasinda and McLeod (2011) found that a ten-week readers-theatre intervention with podcasting helped struggling readers, defined as ‘students who scored a year below their current grade level’ (p. 489), gain an average of 1.13 years on their grade-equivalency scores. Vasinda and McLeod (2011) contended that the ‘permanency’ of the podcasts and an audience that included classmates and family members contributed to the children’s success. Specifically, they asserted the podcasts allowed children to listen to their own reading performances and this self-evaluation component contributed to reading development and improvement. In addition, they discussed ‘audio as a visualizing medium’ (p. 494) and thought the podcasts supported students’ ability to visualize what they read.

Discussion

The drama interventions designed to promote children’s narrative competence suggest there are a variety of ways to use drama to help children acquire skills necessary for understanding and creating well-crafted oral and written narratives. Of the interventions, play-training interventions are the most researched. This line of research has a number of strengths, including the number of different researchers who investigated this topic, the types of standardized measures that were employed, the use of multiple conditions and a control group, the methods used to test alternate hypotheses and variables, such as interactions between age and condition, and the fairly broad age-range of the participants. The quantity of play-training interventions and the diversity of researchers involved allowed later studies to build upon earlier research in order to challenge assumptions, correct weaknesses, refine the research model and attempt to discover the factors that made a particular intervention effective.

In contrast, early childhood studies of readers-theatre and writing interventions are fewer in number and, due to the level of reading and writing proficiency required to participate, have been limited to use with second and third graders. Although it may be possible to extend the scope of the readers-theatre or writing interventions by adapting them for use with first graders, the requisite literacy skills needed for these interventions make them less suitable for very younger children. Nonetheless, these paradigms provide useful insights and methods for fostering narrative competence in the early primary grades and provide fertile grounds for continued research.

The Paley paradigm is particularly notable, because, unlike other interventions used with preschoolers and kindergarteners, this is the only model that integrates narrative construction into the intervention curriculum; play-training studies used narrative assessments, but did not
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give participants multiple opportunities to practise creating narrative discourse within the intervention itself. Although the number of studies and researchers investigating this paradigm are limited, there is evidence to suggest that this method is often used in early childhood education (Cooper, 1993; MakeBelieve Arts, 2015b; Paley, 1999). In addition, professional development programmes have been designed to teach educators to implement this technique (MakeBelieve Arts, 2015a; Rice University, 2011), suggesting there is a population of early childhood teachers interested in learning to integrate this method into their praxis. Although this method is most often championed for use with preschools and kindergartens, there is evidence this paradigm can easily be adapted for use with older children (Cooper, 1993). Finally, the Boston Listens project demonstrates the Paley paradigm can be brought to scale (Mardell, 2013; Sachs et al., 2014).

Research has identified multiple drama strategies that promote the development of children’s oral and written narrative competence. However, as Wagner (1998) discussed, it is important that research studies on the educational efficacy of drama build upon and extend the extant research. Similarly, Shavelson and Towne (2002) averred, ‘Rarely does one study produce unequivocal and durable results; multiple methods, applied over time and tied to evidentiary standards, are essential to establishing a base of scientific knowledge’ (p. 2). Although drama interventions focused on narrative development are promising, replication studies and studies that demonstrate drama interventions can successfully be brought to scale are needed to substantiate the utility of drama as an educational initiative to foster narrative competence. Without such evidence, it is hard to make a case for investing limited funds and allocating limited class time to these endeavours.

It is noteworthy that research on the efficacy of drama in education is an interdisciplinary enterprise. The interdisciplinary nature of this research adds to its richness, as it adds a level of complexity to the methods, measures and theories employed (see Mages, 2008, for a discussion of the methods and measures used in drama research). The multitude of measures, the variety of disciplinary-specific notions of what constitutes rigorous research and valid evidence, and the diversity of theoretical perspectives often make it difficult to compare results across studies.

Interestingly, much of the research on the effect of drama on narrative is conducted by scholars whose expertise is in a field other than educational drama, such as psychology, language and literacy, and early childhood education. This may be due, in part, to differences in the value disciplines place on quantitative research methods. Flemming et al. (2010) observed that qualitative research has ‘become the dominant orthodoxy in arts and drama’ and hypothesize this is because researchers in the arts ‘are more at home with narratives than numbers’, as narratives better reflect the ‘ambiguities and complexities’ of artistic processes (p. 178).

Yet, in the age of accountability, it is often necessary to provide quantitative evidence to demonstrate efficacy or to compare a new method or strategy to the status quo. Scientific methods allow researchers to systematically manipulate variables to determine the factor or factors that can cause similar-seeming interventions to obtain diverse or contradictory results. For example, it would be useful to determine why the evaluation study of MakeBelieve Arts (Cremin et al., n.d.) was unable to demonstrate an effect of a Paley-paradigm intervention on narrative, yet other studies (Fein et al., 2000; McNamee, 1987; McNamee et al., 1985, 1986; Nicolopoulou, 1996, 1997, 2002, 2006; Nicolopoulou et al., 1994; Richner and Nicolopoulou, 2001; Warash and Workman, 1993) were able to demonstrate this association.

As educators and administrators consider ways to engage young learners, support their acquisition of literacy skills and enable them to meet rigorous standards of competence, the
inclusion of drama interventions in the curriculum will depend, to a great extent, on the quality of research demonstrating its efficacy. It will, thus, be necessary for researchers using a variety of research theories, methods and measures to be cognizant of the extant drama research across disciplines and to conscientiously build on and extend what is known about the relation of drama participation to narrative development. Although quantitative research may not be as prevalent among researchers with expertise in educational drama, it will be important that scholars and practitioners who specialize in educational drama share their knowledge and expertise in ways that contribute to and strengthen the research valued by educators and administrators who determine what is included in school curricula. Accomplishing these objectives may require scholars to form interdisciplinary research consortiums that are able to integrate and communicate discipline-specific and multidisciplinary research. A concerted effort to advance the utility and rigour of research investigating the effect of drama interventions on narrative acquisition and development may elucidate particularly effective drama strategies, as well as factors that inhibit the implementation or utility of a particular approach. In an era that venerates research-based practices in education, the role of drama in early childhood education may very well depend on the strength and rigour of research that can clearly demonstrate drama is a valuable technique that engages learners, as it fosters language and literacy development.

Note

1 Following age guidelines set by National Association for the Education of Young Children (n.d.), this discussion focuses on interventions designed for children from birth to eight years old.

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