

# Educational Drama in Early Childhood

## *Promoting Language Development and Supporting Literacy Transitions*

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### **Abstract**

Fostering children's language development in early childhood education is essential, as strong language skills support children's transition from prereaders to competent readers, and strong reading skills are associated with academic success. This brief review of the literature discusses the rationale for using drama in educational contexts and explicates the research-based methods that have been shown to promote language development in early childhood.

### *Keywords:*

Educational Drama  
Language and Literacy Development  
Early Childhood Education

## **1 Introduction**

This article is based on an *International Week 2015* presentation given at the University College of Teacher Education Vienna. It focuses on how educational drama strategies, specifically those in which an adult facilitates as children improvise to enact a story or scenario, can be used to foster language acquisition and to develop skills that support literacy transitions in early childhood education. Although this paper discusses research in English-language acquisition and refers to grades in US schools, the concepts and strategies may also apply to contexts outside of the United States and to contexts in which English is not the medium of instruction.

## **2 Language, Schooling, Culture, and Socioeconomic Status**

Language, schooling, culture, and socioeconomic status can be considered interrelated phenomena that influence children's understanding and development of language and their ability to use language in academic settings. In the United States, schools can be viewed as cultural institutions where verbal ability is equated with competence; more verbal children are considered more competent and tend to be more successful in school. English-language research indicates that verbal abilities in early childhood, even upon entry into preschool, are associated with children's ability to read in third grade, and third-grade reading is associated with high school graduation (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

In today's society, school populations often include children from a variety of cultures who speak a variety of languages or dialects. Multicultural classroom communities can be beneficial for young learners and can provide dynamic learning opportunities and stimulating learning environments, but multicultural classrooms can also present challenges for teachers trying to support language and literacy skills, as culture can affect children's language development. Yet, it is the job of teachers and schools to support the development of all children who enter the classroom. Finding effective ways to support multicultural populations is essential for schools in the twenty-first century.

Culture not only affects the language or languages children speak, but it affects how children use language in context. For example, different cultures favor different discourse styles and may prefer different strategies for structuring a story or narrative. In US academic contexts, a "good narrative" is topic-centered and has a

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linear structure with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Not all cultures prefer narratives constructed in this “linear” style (Cazden, 2001; Michaels, 1981). Moreover, the culture and language traditions with which children are familiar affect not only how children tell stories, but also how well they comprehend stories they read and hear.

In addition, different cultures have different standards for adult-child discourse. This variation can be seen in family dinner-table conversations (Pan, Perlmann, & Snow, 2000). In some families, parents engage children in rich dinner-table conversation. In other families, the aphorism, “children should be seen and not heard” can be used to describe dinner-table discourse. In some families, parents ask children their opinions and offer them choices; in other families parents are more likely to issue directives and expect children to obey (Hart & Risley, 1995).

The type of discourse with which a child is familiar may affect how easily and how well that child adapts to school (Heath, 1982). If a young child’s discourse style is similar to school discourse, school activities can help strengthen a child’s oral narrative skills (Michaels, 1981). However, when a child’s discourse style is different from school discourse, teachers may have difficulty knowing how to support the child’s narrative development. This mismatch between a child’s home discourse style and that of school, coupled with the teacher’s difficulty supporting the child’s narrative skills, can negatively impact the child’s academic trajectory.

In addition to culture, socio-economic status (SES) is related to language development (Hart & Risley, 1995; Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005). More affluent parents tend to have more education and tend to talk to their children more than less affluent, less educated parents. High-SES families also tend to use more child-directed discourse and expose their children to a larger number of words than low-SES parents. This exposure to rich and varied discourse affects children’s language development. Children from low-SES families tend to have less exposure to a sophisticated and diverse lexicon and, thus, often start school with smaller vocabularies and less proficient oral language skills than their peers from higher SES families.

As mentioned earlier, strong oral language skills in early childhood are associated with reading acquisition and school success (Snow, et al., 1998). Thus, oral language proficiency in early childhood can influence a child’s ability to navigate transitions in literacy development. Children who start school with more developed language abilities may have an easier time transitioning from emergent readers to beginning readers and from beginning readers to proficient readers. According to Jean Chall’s model of reading development, the transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” occurs around the end of third grade (Chall as cited in Ely, 2005, p. 417). Children who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade will not have the skills necessary to access the text-based information needed to succeed in school. In sum, children who start out with better language skills are better able to learn to decode and comprehend written texts and become stronger readers; children who start out with poor language skills have a more difficult time learning to decode and comprehend text and, thus, fall further and further behind. This phenomenon, known as the “Matthew effect” (Duff, Tomblin, & Catts, 2015, p. 853), highlights the need for early interventions to remediate language difficulties; early remediation can strengthen young children’s language skills, which can help foster future reading success.

### 3 Educational Drama

So, what can educators do to encourage language learning and promote early literacy acquisition for all children? The use of educational drama in the early childhood classroom is one way to support early language and literacy development. It is important to note that educational drama strategies do not require fancy productions with formal sets, costumes, and lighting. Simply enacting stories can be sufficient to nurture children’s language capabilities.

Vygotsky (1967) wrote, “Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives—all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development” (p. 16). Drama and imaginative play incorporate many of the same elements and function in similar ways. Drama engages the mind, the body, the imagination, and the emotions, as it provides a context for language use.

Bruner (1990) averred that “being ‘exposed’ to a flow of language is not nearly so important as using it in the midst of doing” (p. 70). When children participate in drama activities they use language in the midst of enacting or “doing” what the characters do. In other words, the dramatization provides a salient context for the “flow of language.” In life, when a child hears a new word, it is often accompanied by the object or action

to which it refers and which the child can easily perceive (Bloom, 2002). In this way, the referent and context aid vocabulary development. However, when a child listens to a story, there may be no visual context to support the meaning of unknown vocabulary words. Enacting a story provides a context that can support children's vocabulary acquisition and, thus, help children better comprehend the often complex decontextualized language of books and literature (Mages, 2006).

Research on educational drama indicates that drama participation can foster young children's language development (Conard, 1992; Kardash & Wright, 1987; Mages, 2008; Podlozny, 2000; Wagner, 1998). This may be because drama provides opportunities for children to "use and practice language" (Brown & Pleydell, 1999, p. 6). Enacting adult-authored stories "provides children with a model of 'book language' and story form" (Cooper, 1993, p. 56). Three types of adult-facilitated drama interventions have been shown to promote language development in early childhood: thematic improvisations, story-based improvisations, and Paley-style improvisations (Mages, 2008).

Thematic interventions are the least structured; there are no predetermined characters and no predetermined plots. Instead, children spontaneously enact a theme, such as a trip to a fast-food restaurant (Dansky, 1980) or animals in a jungle (Shmukler & Naveh, 1984-1985). In this type of intervention, an adult can guide children to use their imaginations and familiar scenarios to construct and enact improvisational dramas (see Mages, 2008, for a review of the research literature).

The second type of drama intervention involves dramatizing structured stories (see Mages, 2008, for a review of the research literature). For example, an adult can facilitate as children enact stories from their favorite picture books. Children can enact traditional folktales or modern children's literature. Enacting structured stories can help children understand plot structure, characters, and dialogue, as well as the sophisticated vocabulary found in books.

The third form of drama intervention is based on a curriculum designed by Vivian Gussin Paley (1981, 1984; 1986; 1986; 1988, 1990, 1992, 1995, 1997, 1999), an early childhood educator. Paley's storytelling/story-acting paradigm is unique in that children are given opportunities to dictate their own stories that the whole class will later enact (see Mages, 2008, for a review of the research literature). When the class enacts the story a child created, the child-author has an opportunity to evaluate his or her narrative in action. If the child-author failed to include elements that he or she imagined, or if the story did not have the intended effect on the audience, the enactment makes the missing elements salient. Thus, the storytelling/story-acting process helps children evaluate the quality of their narratives and use that evaluation to inform the construction of future stories. Importantly, a Paley-style drama intervention is currently being conducted in Boston, Massachusetts (Boston Public Schools Department of Early Childhood, n.d.; Mardell, 2013; Sachs, Mardell, & Boni, 2014). The implementation of this large-scale intervention in the Boston Public Schools should contribute to what is known about the effect of this paradigm on young children's language and literacy skills.

## 4 Conclusion

Educational drama provides opportunities for practicing language and literacy skills, and it has been shown to promote young children's language and vocabulary development (Conard, 1992; Kardash & Wright, 1987; Mages, 2008; Podlozny, 2000; Wagner, 1998). Language and vocabulary development provide a strong foundation for the acquisition of reading skills (Snow, et al., 1998). Strong reading skills, in turn, support academic achievement and are associated with high school graduation. Thus, educational drama provides a means for educators to support young children's language and literacy development and to help children navigate the academic transitions associated with reading proficiency and school success.

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