

Rationale for Creative Dramatics and Formal Theatre in the Classroom

By Sarah Anderberg and Kathie Kratochvil
The California Arts Project, Spring 2005

At the foundation of drama is dramatic play. Dramatic play can be described as the “free play of very young children, in which they explore their universe, imitating the actions and character traits of those around them” (McCaslin 7). It is what children do naturally and spontaneously without interference; they pretend. It is a basic human response, particularly in early childhood. The impulse to play is fundamental to the human experience, and essential to educational drama. It is constructivist in nature. Dramatic play for young children offers an opportunity and means of understanding and making sense of the world, and is a bridge between the child’s world and the adult’s world. This magical spirit of play that children innately construct is often overlooked in the public school environment, yet it is the place where children begin to build their creative and imaginative potential.

The core idea behind the utilization of drama processes in the classroom is the desire to continue to foster the development of creativity and the imaginative potential of students that began with dramatic play. In today’s society, creativity and imagination are essential skills, not only for the artist, but for people in all walks of life. Though the educational system often recognizes the value and importance of these skills, their development does not often translate into classroom practice, especially when elementary teachers are under pressure to meet state and federal mandates in other curricular areas. In addition to the development of creativity and imagination, the art form of theatre creates a mirror with which to critically examine society and the human experience, and provides an opportunity for students to deepen their understanding of humanity and cultures, both past and present.

An important distinction in the field of classroom theatre is the difference between Creative Dramatics and Children’s Theatre. Creative Dramatics (or Creative Drama) was officially defined in 1978 by The American Association of Theatre for Youth, as “an improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact and reflect upon human experience” (Davis & Behm 10-11). Nellie McCaslin, in her book, *Creative Drama in the Classroom and Beyond*, acknowledges that the activities involved in Creative Drama are always improvised, that the players create the dialogue, and that what is created is not intended for an audience. Participants are guided by a skilled leader rather than by a theater director. Conversely, the term Children’s Theatre is used to describe formal productions where the entertainment of an audience is the focus. There is usually memorized dialogue and a stage director directs the production. The production can be acted and produced by adults or children, or by amateurs or professional actors (8-9).

Creative dramatics is solely about process and building the necessary skills for students to participate in theatre, to help students develop new understandings of themselves and the world around them, and to become skilled in new ways to communicate through voice and body. This is much different than the process of passing out scripts, assigning

parts, and working toward an end product, which in most instances results in a formalized theatre production. Creative dramatics allows for participants to have multitudes of creative opportunities, and provides sequential learning activities that build on one another to deepen participants' understanding. It is the foundation for the more formalized Children's Theatre. Before students can take on the challenges associated with production, it is essential to first learn the basic theatrical concepts and build theatrical skills and knowledge through the experiential learning offered by Creative Dramatics.

Taking risks in creative dramatics requires sensitive leaders that understand human behavior and relationships, and who are able to help guide and facilitate learning opportunities that allow students to explore while building content knowledge in the discipline. They must facilitate the processes by which one begins to create, take on characters, and explore voice and movement from a variety of vantage points. It is important that instruction in creative dramatics be well delivered, well organized, and very thoughtful, so that the participants have an opportunity to creatively express themselves in a non-threatening environment. Essential to creative dramatics are the communication abilities of listening, understanding, and sometimes compromising. Group dynamics and interplay is a critical facet of creative dramatics and can be a way that others learn more about one another. Nothing is more exciting than observing an effective theatrical work taking shape through the means of collaboration and creation. In this process, the task or activity seems to take precedence over individual tastes and desires. When all members feel safe to contribute and to share, knowing that sometimes ideas are simply not going to be accepted by the group as a whole, the group benefits. By putting aside personal efforts for control and authority for the purpose of the group's successful completion of a task, synergy is built within a group, empowering the members to achieve something that individually they could not do. In the California Theatre Content Standards, which are included in Chapter 3 of the *Visual and Performing Arts Framework for California Public Schools*, this process can be described as the evolution of cooperation at the lower grades, resulting in collaboration at the upper levels.

In the broadest of terms, educational drama experiences provide tools for living. Hodgson and Richards in their book, *Improvisation* (1974) assert that "the qualities needed for the best acting are also those qualities required for the fullest living" (11). Through creative dramatics, children explore who they are, who they have the potential to be, and have the opportunity to reach a deeper understanding of their emotional, physical and social environments. Because acting "is an experience in living" (Hodgson 18), creative drama offers an experience in learning how to live through experimentation. This experimentation has a particularly profound effect on children, because when children are involved in acting through creative drama activities, "they *become* an integral part of the ideas and concepts, internalizing information and increasing the likelihood of its being remembered" (Heinig 9).

References and Resources

California Department of Education. *Visual and Performing Arts Framework for California Public Schools: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*. Sacramento: 2004.

Davis, Jed H., and Tom Behm. 1978. Terminology of drama/theatre with and for children: A redefinition. *Childrens Theatre Review* XXVII (1): 10-11.

Heinig, Ruth Beall. *Creative Drama Resource Book: for Kindergarten through Grade 3*. EnglewoodCliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1987.

Hodgson, John and Ernest Richards. *Improvisation*. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1974.

McCaslin, Nellie. *Creative Dramatics in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. New York: McKay, 1968.