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A FRILL THAT WORKS:  
CREATIVE DRAMATICS  
IN THE BASAL READING LESSON

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The value of creative dramatics as a viable classroom tool has long been debated by researchers and practitioners alike. A myriad of worthwhile outcomes, including critical thinking, concentration, reading comprehension improvement, and basic skills, have been cited by its proponents. However, Massey & Koziol (1978) have noted that the skeptics cite a "paucity of empirical evidence to support such claims." (p. 92)

Creative drama is here defined as "structured and cooperatively-planned playmaking. . . usually developed from a simple story, folk tale, poem, or scenes from a long book. It goes beyond dramatic play or simple improvisation in that it has a form with a beginning, middle, and end. The dialogue is always created by the players, whether the content is taken from a story, poem, or chapter of a book." (Huck, 1979, p. 661)

In a 1968 study, Smilansky examined how sociodramatic play can be used as a means for furthering the intellectual development of underprivileged children. She noted marked improvement in the verbalization of the experimental group, that is, in their quality of speech, their utilization of a broader range of vocabulary, and longer sentences.

In a variation on this study, Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson (1977) found that training preschoolers in thematic-fantasy play led to increases in their intellectual performance, as measured by standard IQ tests.

With regard to creative drama as it relates more specifically to reading, Carlton & Moore (1966), using a technique they termed self-directive dramatization, concluded that significantly greater gains in reading were achieved through the use of this method in combination

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with stories which students selected and read than through the use of methods involving the traditional techniques of the basal readers in small groups or in the whole class.

A 1978 study conducted by Henderson & Shanker compared the use of interpretive dramatics activities to basal reader workbooks for developing the comprehension skills of recognition and recall of details, sequencing of events, and generalizing the main idea. Text results yielded significantly greater gains in all three areas of comprehension during the interpretive dramatics sessions.

Yawkey (1980) worked with 5-year-olds in examining the effects of play in increasing reading achievement. Scores on the Gates-McGinitie Reading Test were significantly higher for children who used play to rehearse story passages than for those in the control group.

As a result of a review of experimental studies in creative dramatics, Massey & Koziol (1978) concluded that "work in creative dramatics can be a positive influence on cognitive development generally and on the comprehension and retention of literature." (p. 94)

The present study is primarily concerned with the relationship that exists between creative dramatics and reading comprehension. The goal of the study is to answer the questions, "Does creative drama positively affect reading comprehension? Will students who dramatically reenact stories achieve significantly higher scores on a post reading comprehension test than those students who do not engage in dramatic reenactment?"

## METHODS

### Subjects

The subjects for this study were 21 sixth-grade children comprising an intact classroom. These children were from a lower middle SES background and 80% black. There were 12 boys and 9 girls.

On the basis of the Ginn and Company end-of-the-book mastery test (720 series) and the basal's informal reading inventories, all children in the sample had been placed into and were reading from the series' sixth-grade level book.

Sixth-grade students had been chosen for this study

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since, by this level, most teachers have completely abandoned any use of creative dramatics in their lessons, concentrating more on discussion, worksheets, and drill.

### Procedure

The class was randomly divided into two groups, the control group containing 11 students and the experimental group having 10 students.

On Day 1 of the study, the African folktale, "Anansi's Fishing Expedition," was read silently by the class. This particular story was used because it was the next one the students were to read. As was usual, vocabulary was discussed before reading the story.

On Day 2, the drama group remained in the classroom as the control group--under the direction of the student teacher--went to the library so that they would not be influenced by the talking, planning, and performing of the experimental group. For the latter group, the remainder of the period was spent discussing the folktale. Suggestions and questions from the teacher's guide were used as a basis for this discussion. An attempt was made to have the discussion be an accurate representation of the type of discussion that usually followed a basal reading story. Vocabulary was reviewed as well. The discussion lasted for the entire 50-minute period.

Meanwhile, the experimental group prepared a dramatic presentation based on the story. The researcher--and leader of this group--followed the recommended steps set forth by Chambers (1970). They are as follows:

1. With the students, decide on the story's main events. List them on the board.
  2. Sequence the events if necessary.
  3. Decide which events to dramatize. Restructure these (what happened first, then what. . .?).
  4. Briefly discuss characterization, setting, and motive.
  5. Designate parts.
  6. Kids go off to plan--approx. five minutes.
  7. Presentation.
  8. Short critique by the audience.
  9. Replay with a new group of children. (Repeat Steps 5-8)
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The entire process lasted 50 minutes.

On Day 3 of the experiment, both groups--now back together in the classroom--received a written posttest consisting of five inferential-type questions based on the short story. Inferential questions are questions that relate parts of the text to each other and the text to the student's experience in order to arrive at expectations. They may be analytic and/or predictive and are generally open-ended. (Farr & Roser, 1979) Inferential-type questions were chosen to test reading comprehension because they are in the highest levels of cognitive questioning (Gall, et al., 1971), are often the most difficult for children to answer, and the least directly taught. (Stoodt, 1984) In choosing a difficult type of question to answer, the researcher hoped that significant differences between the two groups would become more readily apparent.

The five questions asked were the following:

1. What kind of a person was Anansi?
2. What do you think would have happened if Anansi hadn't been fooled by Anene?
3. What other ending can you think of for this story?
4. What would be another good title for this story?
5. Why did the author write this story? (What was the lesson he or she was trying to teach?)

Students wrote out their answers beneath each question.

RESULTS

Table 1 Questions	Control Group	Experimental Group
#1 *	7/11 **	8/10
2	7/11	9/10
3	8/11	8/10
4	7/11	8/10
5	8/11	9/10

\* Question text--above.      \*\* Correct/Possible correct

DISCUSSION

A number of possible limitations accompanied this experimental inquiry into the value of using creative dramatics as a means toward better comprehension. The first is that the researcher directed the experimental group. The students had not previously worked with her and therefore may have been affected by her "newness," thereby being more attentive, more anxious to please, and/or more willing to take risks.

Conversely, the control group was headed by the classroom's student teacher. While he appeared to be doing an exceptionally competent job--as rated by his cooperating teacher and university supervisor--, he may not have been adequately experienced in leading a group discussion in reading.

The sample was very small--a total of 21 students--and comprised an intact classroom.

Likewise, the method was used with only one basal reading story. It becomes difficult to draw conclusions based upon one try. In addition, there exists the possibility that the story used may have been better suited for dramatization than other stories from the basal. Results may have been very different if more than one story had been dramatized.

Finally, no pilot study was done of the posttest inferential questions. They may not have yielded totally reliable results.

Despite the above limitations, the data seems to support the hypothesis that students who dramatically reenact stories achieve significantly higher scores on a post reading comprehension test than those students who do not engage in the reenactment. Results indicated that the sixth-grade students in this study more competently answered inferential-type questions if they had previously participated in the creative dramatization of the basal story.

A few tentative educational implications can be drawn from this study. The first is that creative dramatics, far from being a "frill," is a viable instructional tool when used in conjunction with reading. Students are required

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to practice story comprehension through recalling details, sequencing events, generalizing main ideas, defining characters, and utilizing story vocabulary. The student "experiences" the story first-hand as one of its characters. An intimate understanding of its meaning evolves. In addition, creative dramatics can be easily incorporated into the reading lesson. In the amount of time that it takes for a formal discussion of the story, reenactment of it can just as easily occur.

The second implication stems from the observation that students seemed to take a greater interest in reading during the creative drama session. They appeared eager to recall events and sequence them, and to discuss characters and their motives. Most of all, students actively took part in the reenactment, vying for characters they wished to portray and enthusiastically planning their respective parts. Nearly all of the pupils asked to replay the drama for a third time even though class time was running out. Far from the often passive, "ho-hum" discussions that can follow the reading of a basal story, creative dramatics opened up a well of enthusiasm and activity in the students.

In conclusion, this study has provided information which should be useful when planning a basal reading lesson. The results here should help to emphasize the notion that creative dramatics can be used in place of and/or in addition to the more traditional story discussion. Dramatics is play that works!

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