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Does theatre-in-education promote early childhood development? The effect of drama on language, perspective-taking, and imagination[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This quasi-experimental, multi-method study examines whether participation in a preschool theatre-in-education (TIE) program can promote emergent literacy, theory of mind, and imaginative development. This research combines quantitative assessments of children's narrative comprehension, narrative production, vocabulary development, false-belief understanding, and imagination skills with a qualitative descriptive analysis of the implementation of a theatre-in-education program to investigate the effect of a respected preschool TIE program on the development of 155 urban children enrolled in Head Start. Although the measures used were unable to detect a significant effect of the drama intervention, in the current academic climate, in which an increasing focus on academics in preschool curricula can lead to the elimination of arts programming, it is worth noting that the inclusion of a TIE program did not detract from the children's acquisition of skills that contribute to school readiness; the scores on assessments of language, perspective-taking, and imagination were similar for children in the intervention and comparison conditions. Thus, this study suggests that the inclusion of high-quality theatre arts curricula in early childhood education can provide young children with an entertaining and engaging preschool drama experience while providing academic supports commensurate with those of more traditional early childhood programs.

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1. Introduction

Educators, administrators, and policy makers are eager to find better ways to prepare young children for school success. Effective preparation methods are particularly critical for children from low-income families who, on average, begin school with less academic proficiency than their more affluent peers (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Hart & Risley, 1995; Lee & Burkman, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Drama participation in early childhood has been shown to foster the development of children's language skills (Conard, 1992; Kardash & Wright, 1987; Lee, Patall, Cawthon, & Steingut, 2015; Podlozny, 2000) and is believed to promote children's perspective-taking abilities (Hume & Wells, 1999; Wolf, 1995) and imaginative propensities (McCaslin, 1996). However, evidence indicates that there is a decline in arts education in school contexts (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Goff & Ludwig, 2013; President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2011; Rabkin & Heberg, 2011) and that "students in schools that are most chal-

lenged and [serve] the highest need student populations often have the fewest arts opportunities" (President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2011, p. 32). Including educational drama in early childhood curricula can provide a meaningful, engaging, and educative experience for young learners, while working to counter the documented decline in arts education programming, which disproportionately impacts children in low-income neighborhoods (Bassok et al., 2016; Goff & Ludwig, 2013; President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2011; Rabkin & Heberg, 2011). The current quasi-experimental, multi-method study employs quantitative assessments of children's language, perspective-taking, and imaginative proficiencies, as well as a qualitative descriptive analysis of the implementation of a theatre-in-education (TIE) program, to elucidate the impact of a respected preschool TIE program on the development of urban children enrolled in Head Start.¹

Young children spend many of their waking hours in group care settings. Early childhood group care settings, such as Head Start, are specifically designed to enhance academic outcomes for children

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¹ Head Start is a US government funded preschool program for children whose families live at or below the poverty line.

from low-income families. Yet these child-care settings have been criticized as inadequately enriched language and literacy environments (Zigler & Styfco, 2004). This is particularly problematic because the language skills of children from lower SES families tend to be less developed than those of their peers from higher SES families (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2013; Fernald & Weisleder, 2015; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hurtado, Marchman, & Fernald, 2007; Leech, Rowe, & Huang, 2017), and young children's language skills have been shown to predict their ability to succeed in school (Durham, Farkas, Hammer, Tomblin, & Catts, 2007; Snow et al., 1998).

Children from middle-class families have opportunities to engage in a variety of activities, such as book-reading (Snow et al., 1998) and pretend play (Smilansky, 1968), that foster language development, as well as perspective taking and imagination. Research indicates that children from low-income families often have less exposure to these activities (Smilansky, 1968; Snow et al., 1998). It is, therefore, important for child-care programs that work with children from low-income families to identify and implement curricula that can enhance children's language, perspective-taking, and imaginative development. It would also be beneficial for child-care programs to include arts education programs for children who otherwise might not have the opportunity to engage in the arts. This study draws on research from three disciplines—language development, cognitive development, and educational drama and theatre—and data from an in-depth investigation of a well-respected theatre-in-education program to examine the role that participating in TIE may play in preparing Head Start children for school success.

The Creative Arts Team's Early Learning Through the Arts: New York City Wolf Trap Program developed high-quality TIE curricula for Head Start classrooms in New York City (City University of New York: Creative Arts Team, 2007b). These curricula were designed to foster the linguistic, perspective-taking, and imaginative skills of young participants. Identifying high-quality, educationally sound, early childhood practices that can be scaled up to reach a larger group of children is essential for improving preschool education in general, and may be especially important for improving preschool education within the Head Start context. This study investigated the Creative Arts Team (CAT) Early Learning Through the Arts (ELTA) curricula and the effects of the ELTA curricula on the language, perspective-taking, and imagination development of children from low-income families who were enrolled in Head Start.

2. Theoretical context

2.1. Language development

Research indicates that, on average, the quantity and quality of child-directed discourse in low-socioeconomic status (SES) families is far below that of more affluent families (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003; Rowe, 2008, 2012). Language input that is limited in amount and diversity negatively affects children's opportunities for language development (Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005). For example, children from low-SES families tend to have smaller vocabularies than their middle-class peers (Beck et al., 2002; Fernald et al., 2013; Fernald & Weisleder, 2015; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003; Rowe, 2008, 2012). Moreover, children who begin school with lower oral language abilities are particularly likely to experience reading difficulties (Snow et al., 1998). Reading difficulties, in turn, are directly related to children's academic success. Thus, it is critically important for educators to find effective methods to nurture the language skills of children from low-SES families.

In addition to children's vocabulary development, children's acquisition of narrative skills, such as storytelling and story com-

prehension, has been linked to scholastic success (DeTemple & Tabors, 1996). Peterson and McCabe (1994) noted that "the ability to produce decontextualized language is a crucial skill underlying literacy acquisition" (p. 937). In other words, children's literacy skills were related to their ability to tell a story that could be understood by listeners who were not present when the events occurred. However, research indicates that many children begin school unable to create a sufficiently informative and well-structured narrative (Paris & Paris, 2003).

Children from different cultures or ethnic groups acquire different narrative styles (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992; Westby, 1985). Thus, children's home culture affects the narrative conventions with which they are familiar (Michaels, 1981). When a child's narrative conventions match those of the school context, classroom practices such as "show-and-tell" can be viewed as "oral preparation for literacy" (p. 423). However, when the narrative style a child brings to school is dissimilar to classroom discourse conventions, that child's ability to succeed at school may be jeopardized (Westby, 1985). Research indicates that participating in educational drama and theatre can promote narrative development (for a review of the literature, see Mages, 2017a). Engaging in language-based drama and theatre activities has the potential to help young learners from low-SES families acquire language and narrative skills commensurate with those of their middle class peers and may provide young English-language learners with a compelling context to develop their English-language proficiency.

2.2. Cognitive development

The acquisition of perspective-taking abilities, and the concomitant ability to comprehend other people's mental states, is a hallmark of child development (Astington, 1993; Bradmetz & Schneider, 1999; de Rosnay, Pons, Harris, & Morrell, 2004; Goldstein & Winner, 2012; Hofmann et al., 2016; Pons, Harris, & de Rosnay, 2004; Wellman & Liu, 2004). These abilities are often referred to as children's "theory of mind" (ToM). The developmental trajectory in which children typically acquire different aspects of theory of mind has been documented in the literature (Wellman & Liu, 2004). For example, children's understanding that others can hold a false belief typically develops before children understand that actions and emotions can be based on false-beliefs.

ToM is positively associated with academic outcomes, such as emergent literacy skills (Kloo & Perner, 2008), emergent math abilities (Kloo & Perner, 2008), and reading comprehension (Atkinson, Slade, Powell, & Levy, 2017). Furthermore, Sodian and Frith (2008) note that "the implicit ability to represent mental states is of vital importance for teaching and learning to be successful" (p. 111). Blair and Razza (2007) concur,

As a construct denoting the understanding of one's own as well as others' beliefs and intentions as predictors of actions, false belief understanding represents an aspect of interpersonal functioning that is likely to facilitate not only knowledge acquisition but also the demonstration of acquired knowledge in assessment situations. (p. 659)

Another hallmark of children's development is their ability to use their imaginations in pretend play (Harris, 2000). 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)

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