Drama and Writing in the Kindergarten Classroom

JUSTINE BRUYERE

Abstract
The effect of drama on kindergarten students’ story comprehension and enthusiasm for writing was investigated. Drama, as a teaching tool, allows children opportunities to try out different ways in which they can combine the elements of language to tell stories. This research sets out to compare the writing created following drama and non-drama lessons. I hope to identify if drama encourages an interest in writing and/or inspires greater understanding for narrative at the kindergarten level. Teacher observations, student work and their comments were used to analyze and decipher the events that took place during a six-week period in the fall of 2013.

Introduction
In this practitioner inquiry I investigated how drama-based learning activities might help kindergarten students generate writing ideas and comprehension while simultaneously encouraging participation in classroom writing. I, as a drama teacher, have experienced the potential that drama has to aid writing in a number of ways such as through observable joy, touching dramatic retells, and decidedly creative writing. This was, however, the first occasion on which I collected data at the kindergarten level. My hope during this inquiry was to acquire knowledge on effective practice in order to contribute valuable information to educators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). More specifically, I aimed to gain a greater appreciation for drama as it relates to emergent writing and to share these findings in writing (Murray, 2006).

Learning how to write is an extremely complex process for children between the ages of 3 to 5. Nonetheless, what these young learners lack in writing experience they make up for with their creativity and story ideas. This type of learning requires that the teacher’s definition of writing bend and change with the abilities of the child as he/she progresses and learns throughout the kindergarten year. For the purposes of this paper, I define “writing” as the oral ideas that children dictate during small group conferences, one-to-one interviews and whole class group work. During each intervention (drama or otherwise), either I or the early childhood educator (ECE) were available to write down the spoken words and ideas of students in my kindergarten class. In most cases the students ‘read their pictures’ to us and we wrote the stories as they were dictated (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004; Sulzby, Barnhart & Hieshima, 1988). Narrative understandings at the kindergarten level has been defined as demonstrations of story comprehension, storytelling and responses to mentor texts (Albright, Delecki, & Hinkle, 2009; Hew & Wong, 2010; Stagg-Peterson et al., 2012). In this study, I describe narrative writing as the use of personal ideas, impressions, critical thinking, and feelings to entertain or inform the reader (Derewianka, 1990; Ray & Cleaveland, 2004).
Guiding this research were two research questions:

1) How does drama affect student’s eagerness and willingness to write?

2) What role does drama play in written story ideas, connection to texts and narrative comprehension?

Personally, I have observed that children learn best through doing. My goal is to cultivate creative opportunities for students using drama. When using drama, I concentrate on both the process and the product of my students’ learning, as Anderson (2012) explains:

Drama teaching is process and product. At its heart drama education is providing access to an aesthetic way of knowing that goes beyond the mind/body or process/product dichotomies. Rather, the strength of drama learning is that it is joined up pedagogy that allows young people to engage more of themselves in a potentially deeper learning experience (p. 6).

Throughout this research, I attempted to create a classroom community that was rich with care, inspired uniqueness and, most of all, cultivated students’ eagerness to tell stories. Designing ‘openings’ (or starting points) for authentic storytelling was of the utmost importance. In order to frame instruction in this manner, I observed the students while they engaged in free play activities. As I watched and listened, I was able to observe many of the topics and subjects that my students were naturally curious about, which allowed me to establish a more favorable starting point for future drama lessons. Through these ‘openings’ dozens of students were exposed to occasions for more involved and imaginative writing (Greene, 1995).

In my classroom, the writing process begins with the students engaging in an in-role activity that encourages learning through doing because, as Chapman (1999) writes, “Writing is situated when it is an integral and purposeful part of the various spheres of activity in the classroom. As teachers of writing, we explore and create situations in which writing is useful and meaningful” (p. 473). I use the continuum proposed by Barrs, Barton and Booth (2012) which has three necessary modules. The first is inner speech, or verbal thought. This is where drama comes into play. The final compulsory element to the thought writing continuum is written speech. Barrs et al. (2012) state that “Moving thought into written language thus involved a form of translation, a translation from the extremely condensed expression of a thought-idea into the elaborated expression of it in writing” (p. 16). By situating this continuum alongside drama in education, my students were afforded opportunities to experience inner speech, verbal speech and oral speech while engaged in dramatic activities – all prior to composing pieces of writing.

For this paper, I will discuss four drama-based lessons and student writing outcomes. Each of the lessons used teacher in role, student in role, process drama, story drama, and/or rolling role, and hot seating (see table 1). The students were engaged in-role to take on the
character of another person or object. In so doing, many were able to intimately understand the roles of characters in the stories we read, the roles of people in our lives and the roles of people who we were curious to learn more about. McNaughton (2008) explains the benefits of in-role drama activities for teaching writing:

… research findings indicate that the adoption of multiple role perspectives, a critical feature of process drama, also contributes to the quality of writing and is another thread connecting drama and writing. Writing in role from a particular perspective during process drama, seemed to provide the learners with an extended opportunity to examine and develop that stance as they reflected upon the events of the fiction (p. 285).

For many, the arts hold great power in connection to learning. They have enabled volumes of learners to share, experience, and create with others. When this powerful shared experience is combined with the curriculum, it can create a multifaceted and more expressive environment for students (Fontichiaro, 2007). Many educators and researchers agree that drama offers students of all ages a springboard to momentous, determined writing. As a result of presenting and interpreting text, “pupils become motivated to communicate through emotional identification with characters and their issues” (Farmer, 2011, p. 4). It is this multidimensional learning experience that has allowed countless students to become familiar with the creative process of writing from a new viewpoint. As a learning tool, drama has the potential to nourish the student writing process and the writing, in turn, serves the drama. With each new dramatic writing endeavor, the quality and appreciation of this process is conceivably heightened.

My Kindergarten Classroom

I am a junior and senior kindergarten (JK/SK) teacher in a largely working class city in southwestern Ontario. My school is one of only a few Catholic French Immersion schools in our area that offers full day schooling for kindergartners. My 30 students make up one of the four classrooms in our open concept learning space. Fifteen of those learners are senior kindergarten students and 15 are junior kindergarten students (ranging in age from 4 to 6 years old). I was able to secure parental consent for 25 of my students. All of the students were enrolled in French Immersion learning. There were 16 females and 9 males comprised of four racial/ethnic groups represented in the classroom: Caucasian (21), African American (2), Asian (1) and Other (1). With the exception of two students in senior kindergarten, whose home language was Arabic, the students in the class spoke predominately English at home. Their storytelling, therefore, was a mixture of French and English, though predominately English. This was largely due to the fact that the students were at varying stages of learning in both languages.
My Drama Teaching

The lessons delivered throughout the course of this study incorporated a range of drama conventions that created different demands and prompted particular kinds of thinking and interaction. This inquiry utilized drama as pedagogy rather than a performance-based outcome. When drama is used as pedagogy, it incorporates physical, social, emotional and cognitive elements, which help to deepen the level of narrative understanding for students involved. Thus, “it is both imaginatively and intellectually demanding” (Corbett, Cremin, Mcdonald, Goff, & Blakemore, 2009, p.2). Drama education does more than simply promising laughter for an audience; rather, it is a way of learning (Booth, 1994; Norris, 2000; McNaughton, 2004). The research described here made use of drama as both a teaching/learning tool and as a content area, helping to blend the curriculum expectations with the cross curricular advantages of drama. For this research I have concentrated on the following drama conventions as defined below: teacher in role, student in role, story drama, process drama, rolling role, and hot seating.

Table 1.0- Drama in Education Descriptors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of Drama</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher In Role</td>
<td>Teacher In Role (TIR) is a powerful convention that involves the teacher engaging fully in the drama by adopting various roles. The technique is a tool through which the teacher can support, extend and challenge the children’s thinking from inside the drama. The TIR can influence the events from within the unfolding dramatic situation. Each assumed role has a social rank which gives way to an equal influence: roles of high importance are more domineering and decisive, whereas lower ranking roles are not so influential, but can still play important roles (Heathcote &amp; Bolton, 1995).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student In Role</td>
<td>Student In Role refers to the process whereby the students take on a role along with their teacher. The students imaginatively explore the roles of kings, queens, explorers, superheroes, villains, archaeologists, investigators and so on. There are no set lines or a script. The drama unfolds as the teacher helps to guide the students to new understandings and knowledge. The students build off of one another and allow the events to unfold as if the story is happening in real life. There are no breaks or intermissions. All acting happens in real time with no reference to a script or story. The students simply use what they already know to take on a role and create a drama (O’Neill, 1995).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story Drama</td>
<td>Story drama is a process whereby those involved create a story that everyone has ownership of. In story drama there is a story that becomes the springboard to the drama, which is called the “shared story.” The story of the drama developed by the students then unfolds into what is termed the “created story.” Finally, stories that are</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
triggered by the drama work from student life experiences are often shared and these are called “life stories.” By using hot seating, in-role interviews, and town hall meetings, to name a few, students are able to bring a story to life. Story drama encourages role taking by all class members simultaneously (Booth, 2005).

**Process Drama**

Process drama is most often ignited by an initial dilemma or situation. The objective is to create situations where students can think beyond their own point of view. When they are engaged in a process drama, both the students and the teachers work as a team to create a fictional dramatic world. In that world real issues are considered and problems can often be solved. The classroom community works together to explore problems and issues such as, “Why should we accept others?” “How can we make our world a better place?” or matters surrounding the environment and other ethical or moral issues. Normally, the teacher helps to build dramatic tension while guiding the drama to a specific curriculum outcome (Bolton, 1979 & 1985).

**Rolling Role**

One of the main ideas behind rolling role is drama based lessons that move “from teacher to teacher and [thus allow] many classes to share in common context’ (Anderson, 2009, p. 43). Heathcote herself encouraged the use of technology and the implementation of the digital age through the idea of rolling role. She encouraged participants to research, dramatize and document their learning journeys by posting their work on line (Anderson 2009 & 2012).

**Hot Seating**

“A character is questioned by the group about his or her background, behaviour and motivation. The method may be used for developing a role in the drama lesson or rehearsals, or analyzing a play post-performance” (Farmer, 2011, p. 28). Further, hot seating helps the students to learn how to better pose questions and helps them to solidify their stance in their future writing/acting.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.0- Lessons Delivered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lesson</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
be sent to the “Spy” as their writing activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two</th>
<th>Teacher in Role, Student in Role, Story Drama, Hot Seating.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The story “Click, Clack, Moo- Cows That Type” is shared with kindergarteners. (Synopsis: Cows on a farm demand heating blankets in exchange for milk from their farmer by typing letters on an old typewriter.) Each student chooses an animal mask to wear. As members of the Bruyère Farm the students act as the animal they chose. The teacher is in role as the farmer and prompts the animals to type what they need/want from her. Finally, the students create 3 still images to show the beginning, middle and end of their invented stories. The farmer, the cows and finally the ducks are hot seated by the classroom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Three</th>
<th>Student in Role, Story Drama, Teacher in Role, Hot Seating.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The story “Petit Bleu, Petite Jaune” is shared with the students. The students make predictions about the story. As the story is read the teacher stops and the students act out their predictions in pairs (1 partner is wearing a blue crown, the other a yellow crown). The students then listen to the rest of the story. The teacher enters the classroom as “Petite Violette” and asked the students what they think her story is? In their partnerships the students act out their predictions for the story of Petite Violette. The students hot seat Petite Violette, Petit Vert and Petit Brun.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four</th>
<th>Student in Role, Story Drama, Hot Seating.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The story “Mais Papa” is read to the class. The students engage in the repetitive nature of the story. (Synopsis: Papa Monkey keeps forgetting to give his children things they need before bedtime). The students pause the story to hot seat Papa (a new student plays Papa for each hot seat). Following the story, students are put into 5 groups and each group creates 2 additional things Papa forgot. They create a scene to show their ideas. The teacher takes pictures of their scenes and their ideas are written below and around the pictures. At the writing center the students have the option to make their own “Mais Papa” “Mais Mama” “Mais Grandmère” etc. books.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Upon completing the drama-based lessons, I encouraged my students to visit our writing center to record their ideas on paper. Most of my students showed a real interest in making ‘books’. At the writing center students were able to write, draw and colour on pages we stapled together. This allowed learners an opening to explore the idea of publishing their work, which created excitement in the classroom. Moulton (2009) explains that audiences make a difference in the quality of work that teachers receive. During the writing process students were encouraged to ask for assistance to record their ideas onto paper. Additionally, students were offered the chance to orally present their stories at the end of each day.
Data Sources

I observed student writing processes and their desire to story tell. Further, I collected both completed and in-progress student work after each drama and non-drama intervention lesson. In total, over 80 pieces of student work were collected. I observed the willingness and eagerness with which the students approached the writing center. Additionally, I observed the narrative understandings generated during visits to the writing center with and without drama interventions. And finally, I witnessed student desire to share work in a community setting when given the option to present their storybooks/writing ideas in front of our class.

Images of student work- Image 1

Drama Intervention Writing
Lesson: Mais Papa! (But Dad)!

Upon completion of lesson 4: “Mais Papa”, the students created their own books. The student who authored the book in image 1 does not live with her father. She asked if she could change the book name to, “Mais Mama!”.

She wrote, “Mais Mama, tu as oublié les mots?” Translation: “But Mom, you forgot the words!” She explained that her mother would often practice her French words with her at night.

Image 2

Drama Intervention Writing
Lesson: Mais Papa! (But Dad)!

The student who authored the book in image 2 is one of our quiet students. However, during our drama lesson centered on the book “Mais Papa” he loved playing the “roaring” monster in the closet.

In addition to the scripted portion of the story he wrote, “Le matin à l’école”. Translation: “The morning at school.” The picture shows this student ‘Roar’ at his classmates. He goes on to say, “Mais Papa, tu as oublié les autres monstres!” Translation: “But Dad, you forgot the other monsters!”
Data Analysis

Student writing created at the writing center varied greatly. Despite the fact that a teacher or an ECE was available to scribe for students as needed, some students did not wish to add words to their work. Nevertheless, the tasks from the writing center were given a score between 1-3 for narrative understanding. A score of one (1) revealed that the student used zero to two words to describe each image, making basic connections to the ideas in the mentor text (some understanding). A score of two (2) revealed that the student created sentences to describe his/her ideas in association with the lesson taught and was able to make reasonable connections to the text (good understanding). And finally, a score of three (3) revealed that the student not only had complete sentences, but he/she also included story writing ideas such as “Once upon a time”, original dialogue between characters, imaginative ideas and/or elements such as a beginning, middle and end. Further, the student demonstrated a strong appreciation for the mentor text while displaying critical thought (excellent understanding).
Examples of Understanding:

Score of one (1) example:

Score of two (2) example:
Score of three (3) example:

To analyze observation data, I monitored the number of visits students made to the writing center on both non-drama and drama intervention days. Further, I observed their time spent at the writing center as an indicator of my students’ participation and engagement in the drama activities while there.

On non-drama intervention days, the students partook in a story telling/questioning period. First, they were shown the pictures of the chosen story without words. Next, I read the story aloud and the students, in their own words, told the story from their place on the carpet. Finally, the students shared their connections and ideas about the text. In some instances, these non-drama intervention lessons were connected to further learning outside of the classroom. In one such case (story: Les Nuages), we surveyed the sky looking for clouds that resembled things we recognized, such as dogs, castles and cars. The high interest early reader stories used for the non-drama portions of this research were: 1) Les Nuages, 2) Les Pompiers, 3) La Fête and 4) L’Oiseau Vole.

Image 5- Student pictured at the writing center:
Image 6

Non-Drama Intervention Writing Lesson: Les Nuages (The Clouds)

The book we read as a class challenged students to creatively see the clouds in the sky. For example, to see a dog running or a giant ice cream cone in the shapes that clouds make. Image 6 shows student work created from the prompt: What do you see? Student response: “Un ciel orageux!” Translation: “A stormy sky”.

Image 7

Non-Drama Intervention Writing Lesson: Les Nuages (The Clouds)

During this exercise many of the students duplicated ideas that were shared in our mentor text. One such duplication is shown here (Image 7) from the prompt: What do you see? Student response: “Je vois les nuages qui sont des poissons!” Translation: “I see fish clouds”.
Results

Motivation to Write

Following the four drama-based lessons, more than 60% of the classroom visited the writing center voluntarily. On each of the four drama lesson days, there were an average of 19 students (of a possible 25) who visited the writing center to record their thoughts and ideas. The high interest on drama intervention days prompted us to open a second writing center table. Shown in Table 3.0, on four non-drama days, an average of 10 students (of a possible 25) visited the writing table during 100 minutes of free play, and on two occasions, we were also obliged to open a second table due to student interest.

On days where drama was used to deliver literacy lessons, many students were visibly excited, attentively listening and fully engaged. The writing thereafter was, in most cases, much more descriptive, containing more story comprehension indicators and having less one-word responses. The ECE and I often observed students who yearned to spend their free-play time at the writing center, more so than other activity centers in the classroom. Non-drama day lessons typically saw fewer students visiting the writing center on the whole. Nevertheless, there were quite a few students (up to 14 on DAY 3) who were determined to story tell.

Table 3.0- Number of students visiting the writing center on non-drama and drama intervention days.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non Drama Days:</th>
<th>Drama Intervention Days:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DAY 1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAY 2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAY 3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAY 4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>9.75 Students</td>
<td>18.5 Students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.0- Narrative comprehension (as displayed in writing tasks) with and without drama intervention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1(Some Understanding)</th>
<th>2 (Good Understanding)</th>
<th>3(Excellent Understanding)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With Drama Intervention</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without Drama Intervention</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen from Table 4.0, I analyzed the written work completed by the JK/SK students with and without drama interventions. During this examination, I looked for story comprehension and personal connection indicators. When students displayed the use of personal ideas, critical thinking and/or the desire to entertain or inform the reader, the scores reflected these connections. On days where drama learning occurred as a precursor to the writing, 42% of the classroom achieved a good understanding score, while 34% attained a score of excellent understanding. Without drama as a precursor to the writing, 62% of the students (who freely chose the writing center during our play time) achieved a score in the good category and 10% reached a score in the excellent range. The students, though still eager to write, had more incomplete ideas, more one-word sentences and diverged less from the original story. Nevertheless, 10% of the students presented written work with strong personal connections and story understanding indicators.

**Recommendations and Conclusions**

My findings show the authority of dramatic pedagogies. In this study, drama practices not only helped to create an initial enthusiasm for writing, but also the lessons facilitated and transferred that keenness to written work on non-drama days. A supposition from this research might be that through the use of in-class drama pedagogies, students have decidedly more interest in recording their ideas and can better display their understanding of the narratives shared.

From this inquiry, I have gathered that drama can act as a catalyst to more motivated and thoughtful writing even when the drama lesson takes place a full day before the writing exercise. Drama practices develop thoughts into oral language, through role-play, and in-turn help young authors to be more certain about their views on a particular piece of writing. This enables students to transfer these story connections and critical thinking skills to future writing activities. In a study conducted by Barrs et al., “one of the project’s conclusions was that writing in role . . . had extended the children’s range as writers. It had produced quite different kinds of texts from their normal first-person writing” (2012, p. 21). Similarly, I can conclude that a large portion of my students showed strong connections and story comprehension in their writing following drama interventions, even when a day had passed. By creating environments rich with openings to examine stories and writing from multiple viewpoints, students were provided the chance to write and act as characters that they may not otherwise have explored without the intervention (Greene, 1995).

During this research, there were occasions when I wished I had more time with a particular lesson. In future research, I intend to offer students more time by extending my data collection phase and broadening my sample size to include students of greater age ranges. Further research in this area would guide best practices and benefit young writers in our school system. Another research question might seek to compare early writing in French Immersion and English learning kindergarten classrooms using drama interventions.

The drama pedagogy used in this study assisted many of my kindergarten students by placing them in the role of a fictional character, which allowed that character to come alive in their own stories. As Donald Graves (2004) stresses, all children hunger to write if you let
them. Through drama interventions, I have observed how stories can come to life both on the page and in the classroom.

In conclusion, I return to the main point of this research: did drama have an effect on kindergarten students’ story comprehension and enthusiasm to write, as evidenced by their writing? It was uncovered that many of the students in this study earnestly aspired to write, especially when drama was the precursor to that writing. Teacher observations, student work and comments were used to examine changes in comprehension and motivation during non-drama intervention and drama intervention days. The findings from this research suggest that drama-based lessons provided a large portion of my kindergarten class with opportunities for more meaningful play while offering a valuable springboard for early writing. Despite the positive influence of drama on a considerable number of the students in this single classroom, it is not possible to generalize this data due to the limited size and breadth of this research study. A longitudinal study with a larger sample size is needed in order to clarify and complement the findings gathered here. It is my hope that further research in this area will help to solidify drama as a beneficial precursor to writing for early learners, specifically those in kindergarten.

References


**Author Biography**

Justine Bruyere is a student at OISE, the University of Toronto. This research took place in the fall 2013 in the Windsor Essex Catholic District School Board where she was a JK/SK teacher at the time.

---

*Journal of Classroom Research in Literacy*  
*Spring 2015*  
*Page 24*