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## Using drama as an effective method to teach elementary students

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# **Using Drama as an Effective Method for Teaching Elementary Students**

By: Mandie M. Moore

## **Introduction: Getting Involved**

“Tell me, and I'll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I'll understand” (An Old Native American Proverb). I remember reading this quote at some point during my college education and thinking that there was much truth to it. Too often I sat through lecture after lecture wondering how I was going to remember all this new information. That was until I took my required U.S. Government course. This professor (whether he knew it or not) taught us using drama. The entire class was *involved* in a simulation of the government, in which we took on roles of real people. In school, social studies was never my favorite subject. I think that it may have bored me so much that I never bothered trying to understand it. For the first time, I was involved in learning social studies. From this point on, I decided that when I teach my elementary students, I would involve them.

I learned how I would involve my students after taking several communication and theatre arts courses. A study by Kaaland-Wells in 1994 showed that “teachers who had taken a college drama course were more likely than the others to feel that it should be a part of all teacher training, and they were more likely to view it as effective” (Wagner 12). My passion for children and teaching inspired me to do further research into this method. I wanted to reach the students as my professor did for

me and bring them to a higher level of understanding of the topics I teach. My belief is that knowledge is power and students should love to learn. While I feel that all of the arts can be influential learning tools, drama is especially powerful. Betty Jane Wagner, an educator who has worked closely with and shared many ideas with Dorothy Heathcote, an expert in the field of drama in education, asserts her opinion of drama. "Drama is powerful because its unique balance of thought and feeling makes learning exciting, challenging relevant to real-life concerns, and enjoyable" (9). As educators, if we are not providing a fun and meaningful learning environment for our children to learn, then we are not doing our jobs.

Research indicates that using drama in the classroom as a means of teaching helps students learn academically, socially, and developmentally. "The use of drama as a tool for teaching is not new. Historically, both drama and theatre have long been recognized as potent means of education and indoctrination. The ways they are used today, however, are new, and they differ in a number of respects from the ways they have been used in the past" (McCaslin 271). Arts advocates and educators have recently started to explore the use of drama as an integrated way of learning the curriculum.

I strongly believe that the arts should be employed in every classroom. It can reach students who otherwise couldn't be reached, and challenge students who have already grasped the concepts. Drama

provides a fun means of learning. It brings the affective back into the classroom, an institute where emotions and learning are categorically divided. Recent brain research proves that emotions are linked with learning. When we connect to the concept emotionally, we will have a better understanding of it. When we teach using the arts we are linking prior experiences with new stimuli. Teaching using drama brings emotion and learning together.

Most importantly of all, using drama to teach in the elementary classroom gets students involved and gives them the power to have a key role in their education. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, who wrote the article, “Drama is Imagining to Learn: Inquiry, Ethics, and Integration through Drama,” writes, “Through drama, students became a part of the learning process rather than mere observers or inactive receptacles of the rich experience of learning; in this way, their learning was deeper, more sustained, and infinitely more complex” (1). This paper will demonstrate the validity of using drama to teach students and the elementary curriculum. Through research of the arts, drama in particular, and a close look at how people learn, one can attest that teaching using drama can enrich the classroom environment.

### **Purpose of Research**

“We conduct research in order to understand our field, to learn how to become more effective teachers, and to explain to those outside

our field why we use drama as a way to educate students” (Wagner 1).

The purpose for researching drama in education, is to determine whether using drama is an effective method for teaching elementary students.

The research will demonstrate to educators and the like, why they should integrate drama into the elementary curriculum. This paper will not attempt to advocate drama as the *only* method of teaching, but rather as a supplement to traditional teaching methods. Through further examination on recent brain research and how people learn, one can conclude that using drama can be a successful way to teach elementary students. All educators can employ the method of using drama to teach all subject areas. Children learn in different ways, so an effective teacher will employ many different teaching strategies in attempt to reach all of his or her students.

Today’s elementary classroom is very much controlled by the state. It is an age of standards and benchmarks. “Brain-based research validates that learning is individually specific. This implies that standardized materials, instruction, and practices may actually diminish or inhibit learning” (Lawson 2). The specific curriculum benchmarks and standardized tests provide very little leeway for teachers to deviate from. Since funding for the schools depends on whether the students meet standardized test score requirements, many educators find themselves teaching to the test. This can cause educators to cover a significant amount of information over a short period of time. This will result in

students gaining a large quantity of knowledge with very poor quality.

This exact phenomenon is proven by a study done by Preston Feden and Robert Vogel who compared textbooks in the United States to those in other countries:

According to one study, math textbooks in the United States cover 175 percent more topics, yet German students outperform American students in math achievement. Why? The answer is that the human brain can only absorb so much information at a time. By concentrating more on less information, students are better able to retain and use knowledge (2).

Research on drama in education will inform future and present elementary school teachers the benefits of maintaining a drama-integrated classroom.

### **What is Drama?**

Drama is the act of using the imagination to become someone or something other than yourself. It can take one any place to any period of time. It is only limited by the imagination, the participants' fear of risking, or the leader or teacher's set limitations. Richard Courtney, a professional in the area of drama in education defines drama as, "The human process whereby imaginative thought becomes action, drama is based on internal empathy and identification, and leads to external

impersonation” (vii). Courtney believes also that “life is a drama.” Humans are always acting and improvising. When we meet someone for the first time, we improvise our conversation. Life has no script written for us, however, we can use role-play to practice the anticipated situation (1).

In their book, Imagining To Learn, Jeffrey Wilhelm and Brian Edmiston define drama simply as, “wondering, ‘What if...?’ and then interacting with others in a drama world as if that imagined reality was actual” (3-4). Through looking at these definitions of drama, one can see the impact it could have in the classroom. “Asking ‘What if...?’ is not an optional question in the curriculum—imagining possibilities is the core of understanding other people, other times, and other places” (Edmiston 4).

“Watching children working in drama provides fascinating insights into the richness of their imaginations, the skill with which they negotiate with one another, their present level of critical thinking, and the sophistication of the language they use” (Verriour 7). Gavin Bolton calls the form of drama used to teach in the classroom, “dramatic playing.” “Dramatic playing is characterized by a high degree of spontaneity as teacher and students work to create a fictional world in which they assume roles to explore issues that are of concern to them” (Verriour 9). Most professionals in the area of drama in education would define drama very correspondingly. They would all agree that drama is the act of participants joining in an imagined world and taking roles of



others. By doing so, students are able to learn through other perspectives and act as one would in the imagined situation. Drama, although not new to humans has had an integral impact on history and those who lived through it.

Drama and theatre arts have been around since ancient times. “Most familiar to us in the Western world is the theatre of ancient Greece, which developed from celebration and dance into a golden age of theatre” (McCaslin 271). This form of art and its artists were highly respected. “Plato, in *The Republic*, advocated play as a way of learning. Aristotle urged education in the arts, distinguishing between activities that were means and those that were ends” (McCaslin 271). Many cultures have found using drama to teach religion to be very successful. “The medieval church taught through the medium of mystery plays and in doing, helped to restore theatre to its proper place as a great art form” (McCaslin 271). Drama was used to teach, and as a form of entertainment.

The ideas of using drama as a medium for teaching are not new ideas. However, the western world has yet to widely accept the use of drama as a teaching medium for the elementary curriculum. Much of the research on drama in education today can be accredited to scholars in England, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Some arts advocates have succeeded in bringing drama and theatre arts into the schools as an entirely separate program. Even this is still lacking in numerous

schools. Although drama in education is not a new idea, recent brain and educational research is causing it to grow in popularity. Educators who use drama to teach their students are finding it to be a very successful method and therefore, are spreading the word.

### **Drama is a Way of Life**

Drama is a natural, innate form of learning for children. As young as toddlers, children play house and pretend to be doctors, teachers, or some other career, which fascinates them. These children are using drama to practice for or imitate life. In her book, Dramatic Play in Childhood- Rehearsal For Life, V. Glasgow Koste includes a text taken from a cereal box, in which attempts to explain the importance of dramatic play. “Playing is one of the most powerful ways for a child to learn. He looks at the world around him and plays what he sees—going to the office, driving a bus, make-believe stores or parties and on and on. He tries different ways of acting, assumes various roles and challenges himself with all sorts of problems” (Koste 2). Dramatic play helps children prepare for life and cope with growing up. It allows children to explore and make sense of the complexities of life without experiencing failure.

Since dramatic play is so innate in children, it should be carried on into the elementary classroom. It is something that children are very good at and love to do. “Children bring with them to the classroom the

universal human ability to play, to behave, “as if” ; many children spontaneously engage in such dramatic play from as young an age as ten months” (Wagner 9). It is very natural for a child to use his or her imagination to transform him or herself even as young as infancy. They are experts in the field. Renowned psychologist, Sigmund Freud states, “We ought surely to look in the child for the first traces of imaginative activity. The child’s best loved and most absorbing occupation is play. Perhaps we may say that every child at play behaves like an imaginative writer, in that he creates a world of his own or, more truly he rearranges the things of his world and orders it in a new way that pleases him better...” (Koste 1). When children transform themselves their imagination is set free. They are then able to make connections between their previous experiences and the unknown. It is this connection that helps children and adults learn best.

Drama is a way of life. It is embedded in each and every person’s lives from birth to death. We naturally use drama to learn, explore, and solve problems in new and difficult situations. John Dixon states, “The taking on of dramatic roles, the dramatic encounter with new situations and with new possibilities of the self is not something we teach children but something they bring to school for us to help them develop” (Wagner 9). Not only should teachers use drama to teach the elementary curriculum, but also use drama to teach the students. The educator’s job in the classroom is to teach students the curriculum and help them

become life-long learners. To become a life-long learner or someone who uses their skills to teach himself and solve everyday problems, the person must acquire some basic social and problem solving skills.

Drama is a great way to develop these skills.

It is quite difficult to process something that has no personal meaning to us when we are learning something new. Perhaps it is put best by saying, “Facts are empty without being linked to context and concepts” (Perry 1). When we learn something new, we connect it to something we already know. For example, if someone has never seen or experienced the ocean before, but listens to someone describe the ocean and how it looks, they will process this by connecting it to their prior experiences. Maybe this person has been to a big lake with waves and a beach where people play in the sand and swim. This person already has a *similar* experience to that of going to the ocean, so their idea of the ocean is better understood. The ideas of connecting new information with something we already know have been affirmed by Robert Vogel, who has studied cognitive science as it applies to education, for fifteen years. “According to research, the human brain, when learning, strives to make connections. ‘The brain does not learn in isolation,’ says Vogel. Lessons have to be taught in a way so that the new knowledge connects to something the student already know, he says” (2). Drama can do that for the brain since it is a way of life. It is a practice we are born with. We know drama, so we can connect it with new ideas learned in school.

Also, drama allows the learner to explore their experiences in using their imaginations.

### **How to Use Drama in the Classroom**

Putting on plays for an audience is not what is meant by using drama in the classroom. The goal is not to teach acting and performance skills. The goal is to teach the core curricular areas using drama. Betty Jane Wagner, an internationally recognized authority on composition instruction and the educational uses of drama, states of the purpose of role play, “The role playing is improvisational, not scripted and memorized to present a performance for an audience. The emphasis is on drama as an intentional teaching strategy to enhance learning in a particular curricular area” (5). There are many ways in which drama can be integrated into the elementary classroom. Drama can be a way to teach all subject areas. Language arts, social studies, and science are subject areas, which are very successful in using drama. “It is particularly effective in making a historical event come alive for students,” says Wagner (5).

A real life example seems to be the best way to illustrate how drama can be used in the classroom. When I student taught a second grade class last year, one of the required benchmarks to meet was to teach about Thanksgiving. Instead of telling the students about Thanksgiving, I let them be the teachers. I assigned them each to a

group, which would cover a specific topic of Thanksgiving. (Mayflower, Pilgrims, Native Americans, feast) I told the class that their group was to choose some way to teach the class about their topic. Without influencing their decisions, I noticed that every one of the groups chose to use role play to teach their classmates. It was an immediate, unanimous decision made by all groups to use drama to teach the class. This told me that children most definitely love using drama to learn.

On the day they were to teach, it was amazing to see the students in role. They really imagined themselves back in time to the first Thanksgiving. Students came dressed to look their parts. Many of them did extra research on their own to learn what their Pilgrim role would look and act like. While each group went in front of the room to teach, the class was intensely involved in the learning. Since this experience those second graders are experts on Thanksgiving. This class voluntarily went above and beyond their given requirements to learn.

This is just one example of how drama was used as a method of teaching in the elementary classroom. Role-play can be a very powerful teaching tool. This and different aspects of drama can be used to teach all the curriculum areas. Holly Giffin, Ph.D. writes, "In the field of education there is tension between the growing concern that children meet external, culturally-approved standards, and the growing body of research and theory suggesting that learning is far more complex and

individualized than the standard-makers ever thought” (Koste xiii).

Educators must take this into consideration when teaching children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For many years famed psychologists have viewed drama as a way of learning. While studying the growth of humans cognitively, psychologists have found that drama provides a sound foundation for development. “Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner both see cognitive growth as dependent upon interactive play and upon children imagining themselves acting in worlds that are developmentally a bit above their actual physical and intellectual level. Both provide a solid foundation for using drama in the classroom as a way that deepens and enlarges understanding” (Wagner 15).

“Dr. Howard Gardner, co-director of Project Zero at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, has developed a theory of multiple intelligences which suggests that our school systems, which reflect our culture, teach, test, reinforce, and reward primarily two kinds of intelligence--verbal and logical-mathematical” (Dickinson). Dr. Gardner has suggested that students learn in many different ways. We all have different intelligences that reflect how we learn and what interests us. Gardner names at least five separate intelligences that humans may comprise. If educators teach their students knowing that there are other intelligences besides only verbal and logical, then

students will have better chances of learning. “They [intelligences] include visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences” (Dickinson). Gardner has recognized each of these intelligences as equally important to learning. “These intelligences provide the foundations for the visual arts, music, dance, and drama, and through these art forms most students will not only find the means for communication and self-expression, but the tools to construct meaning and learn almost any subject effectively” (Dickinson).

The following diagram from Carolyn Chapman’s, “If the Shoe Fits...How to Develop Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom,” illustrates the ways drama could engage each of Gardner’s seven intelligences. Each one of the intelligences is accompanied by an example of how drama would develop this intelligence. See figure 1.1 below.



Through Gardner's theories, it is evident that drama is a highly effective means of reaching students with intelligences that are not reached through traditional teaching methods. The intelligences are inherent in creative drama. The application of multiple intelligences to education is a mass movement among teachers that is only just beginning. Hopefully, using drama as a teaching strategy will be the foundation for future developments of multi-intelligence teaching approaches. "Instruction for cognitive skills and objectives without affective dimensions may be efficient but not effective" (Lawson 2).

Much of my own knowledge and ideas about education and learning are based on the Constructivist Theory. This theory deems that humans do not learn by soaking up external sources, but rather we learn by actively making our own meaning. "One theoretical viewpoint about modern educational Drama emerges from the ideas of educators such as Rousseau, Montessori, Bruner, and Dewey. They say that learning happens through active participation, or as Dewey states "learning by doing (Courtney 1). Drama is a form of "learning by doing." Dewey also stressed the importance of the imagination. He called imagination the "gateway through which meanings are derived from past experiences that are carried into the present" (Iannone 307). Creative drama is engrossed by the participant's use of imagination. The curriculum should integrate the imagination or aesthetic world with the cognitive world of the

student. “John Dewey’s, ‘learning by doing’ theory shaped the progressive era in education” (Wagner 15).

The benefits of drama move far beyond the cognitive aspects. Although it can be a powerful way to teach the elementary curriculum, it can also be a prevailing approach to teaching the students themselves. Students learn valuable social skills, and develop proficiency for continued success in life. Richard Courtney believes that children must act out their thoughts with physical actions. They do not have the ability to act it out in their head, or “mind’s eye,” as adults do. (Courtney 1). Drama, which involves imaginative transformation and reflection on experiences, helps students expand their ability to act out thoughts in their minds. This skill is necessary for organizing thoughts and problem solving situations in everyday life. “When a significant event is coming up, we frequently rehearse it beforehand in our minds” (Wagner 16). The skill of playing thoughts out in your mind is also essential for reading comprehension. This is what we do when trying to understand a difficult text. The reader “pictures” what is happening in the text to better understand it.

Drama is also beneficial because of how much the participants engage with each other. This helps to develop valuable social skills in young children. In order for children to be able to learn, they have to feel safe and comfortable. The engagement with each other in drama builds

trust and strong relationships. These ideas parallel that of the Social Cognitive Theory.

### **Brain Research**

To really understand how drama has a positive impact on learning, one must first be familiar with how humans learn. “The value of using drama in education is supported by research into how people learn. ‘Much recent brain research demonstrates how the arts are able to tap into areas of experience and knowledge which are as significant to the development of learning skills as the traditional 'three R's',’ says Juliana Saxton, who is the co-chair of drama in education conferences” (Conference 1). Each person learns best a little differently. Some learn best by visualizing, some by audible, and some by kinesthetic. However, not every person falls into one of these categories. In fact, many people would confess that they remember something best by using a combination of all three types of learning. This is why teachers must utilize all methods of teaching in the classroom. Using drama can be of benefit to all types of learning.

Studying the brain would provide insight as to how humans learn and what methods would be successful to apply in the classroom. “We are on the verge of a revolution: the application of important new brain research to teaching and learning. This revolution will change school start times, discipline policies, assessment methods, teaching strategies,

budget priorities, classroom environments, use of technology, and even the way we think of the arts and physical education” (Jensen 1). It seems logical that educators would naturally take current brain research into consideration when teaching. However, until only recently there has been technology, which has allowed us to study the brains of living people. Dr. Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D., is an internationally recognized authority on brain development and children in crisis. He states, “Over the last 40 years we have learned more about the human brain than in the previous 400 years. Educators and neuroscientists have been trying to put this knowledge to work by transforming the information of basic and clinical neurosciences into practical insights for the classroom” (1).

Brain research has allowed us to explain many aspects of behavior and learning in the classroom. “We now know the biological roots of impulsive and violent classroom behavior. Many of our conventional educational beliefs are being shattered like glass” (Jensen 2). With the explosion of discoveries with new technologies, we are able to adapt our ways of teaching to best suite the way that our students learn. It is clear that emotions are linked to learning. Hands-on learning is a more effective means of learning, being involved in the learning is powerful, and we learn best by connecting new ideas with old. Each of these ideas can be emphatically proven through recent and extensive brain research.

A depiction as to exactly what process the brain goes through when we learn would clarify why drama would help one learn. James R.

Lawson, author of the article, “Brain-Based Learning,” describes this process. The brain undergoes an electrochemical process in which information is transferred from one neuron to the next. The brain is made up of billions of these nerve cells called neurons (1). “Neuron connections are flexible, webbed, overlapping, and redundant. Internal and external stimuli collaborate in the formation of pathways and patterns of excited neurons. The more frequently pathways or patterns of neurons are used the stronger the pathways and patterns become” (Lawson 1). It is important that these pathways and patterns become stronger because as they do it becomes more probable that they will be created again. “Simultaneous excitation of multiple pathways and patterns create growth of new neuron connections, thus increasing the potential of the brain to learn” (Lawson 1). This is a simplified description of the physiology of the brain and how it learns. It is important when teaching to connect the new material with student’s past experiences because it is this “simultaneous excitation” that helps us learn.

Drama is a teaching method, which would allow students to explore the curriculum using several of Gardner’s multiple intelligences. Students are fully involved in learning with drama. They are immersed into the subject. Their bodies, minds, and emotions are extremely active when they become engrossed in the drama. A common misconception is that the brain is like a storage unit, which can store and retrieve

information at any given time; the brain is an exceptionally complex system of making connections and creating new information. “The human brain is the most complex system on earth, yet it is too often used in schools primarily as a simple device for storage and retrieval of information” (Dickinson 1). Teachers who orally lecture students, loading them with facts and figures, and then test them on what they remember, are not teaching with the brain in mind.

During drama activities, the student’s schema or prior knowledge of the subject is activated to really come to a complete understanding. Essentially, when we learn, we are synthesizing. We are merging our prior knowledge with the fresh information and creating something new in our minds. “Each brain is unique. Genetic and environmental factors influence learning and the connections between cells are created by an individual’s unique experiences” (Lawson 1). Drama is such a great way of synthesizing because of how involved the participants must be. They must recall their schema prior to the drama and use their new knowledge to create the drama. When the drama is over, there is room for reflection. Reflection is often a step that is overlooked in traditional teaching methods. “Students do not just act in drama—they also *reflect* on the *meanings* of actions as they consider the consequences for different people. Reflection is dialogic when the students *evaluate* actions from the point of view of a person affected” (Edmiston 60).

Eric Jensen asserts, “Today’s educators should embrace a more complex, ‘whole-systems approach’ to understanding the brain” (Jensen 4). Instead of recognizing the brain as two separate and diverse hemispheres, educators should know that both sides of the brain are equally critical to learning. The left and right hemispheres work together. The prior theory that only the left side of the brain controls academic learning, while the right side controls the arts is out dated and has been proven otherwise with new research. “In general, the left hemisphere processes things more in parts and sequentially...Suffice it to say that the old biases about music and arts being ‘right-brained frills’ are out dated” (Jensen 8). The figure of the brain below (2.1) shows functions of different areas of the brain. New research divides the brain into four areas. Each area is called a lobe. Figure 2.2 illustrates where the frontal, parietal, temporal, and occipital lobes are located in the brain. From both figures, it is clear that drama would activate a wide area of the brain. (Jensen)

Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

(from Jensen’s, Teaching with the Brain in Mind)

The frontal lobe is involved in creativity, judgment, and problem solving. In drama, the student is creating something new. Their imaginations are activated and many times students work together to solve problems in drama. Problem solving in drama comes in two forms. First, it is part of the learning experience. For example, a class is studying the Oregon Trail and pioneer days. The teacher has informed the class that they are all pioneers on the Oregon Trail. She has already read them some books on the Oregon Trail, so the students have some background knowledge that will be accessed. The students must work together to problem solve how they will eat, cross large bodies of water, and overcome other obstacles set up by the teacher that would mimic real problems the pioneers faced. Each student in this class is creatively problem solving in this drama. They are using their best judgment and retrieving their schema about the Oregon Trail.

The second way problem solving is practiced with drama is socially. Most drama in education is done in groups or with the whole class. Students run into problems where, for example, they do not agree on a solution or action the rest of their group is taking. Wagner states, "Participants in drama must negotiate their roles. Unless they can agree and cooperate, the game is over" (28). Like all group work, students must problem solve how they will handle this conflict of interest. This type of problem solving helps students become life long learners. Most definitely as adults we all face problems in our social lives. Whether



problems occur at home, school, or in the workplace we all use problem-solving skills to resolve issues. Drama in education calls for more group work, so students obtain the crucial skills needed throughout life. It is quite evident that the frontal cortex part of the brain is very much triggered using drama.

The frontal cortex is not the only area of the brain that is indispensable in use with drama. Other parts of the frontal lobe are needed for speaking, senses, and some motor skills. “The temporal lobes (left and right sides) are above and around the ears. This area is primarily responsible for hearing, memory, meaning, and language. There is some overlap in the function of the lobes” (Jensen 9). The middle area of the brain is responsible for emotions among other tasks. This area known as the limbic system makes up about 20 percent of the brain. (Jensen). This is a vast section of the brain, which is utilized by participants of drama. During drama, students not only engage their senses, but they also maintain an emotional tie to the topic. Students are encouraged to take on a full body role throughout drama activities, which includes feeling their role’s emotion.

### **Emotions and Learning**

In the example of the Oregon Trail simulation, students took on their role’s emotions as well. For instance, they became excited when they were able to accomplish or solve one of their problems. They

showed disappointment and anger when they failed at finding food or other difficult situations. Not only did the students learn about the Oregon Trail, but they also learned how the pioneers lived and felt. “The brain learns best when it processes cognitive, affective, and psychomotor information simultaneously” (Lawson 2). The participants of the drama were processing all this information at once. These experiences completely enriched their understanding.

Students elicit speech, senses, emotions and motor skills when occupied with a drama activity. Therefore, educators who use drama in the classroom are adopting the “whole-brain” approach to learning. Many different parts of the brain are being activated. This generates a much bigger possibility that the students will learn the subject. The area of the brain that operates emotions makes up 20 percent of the entire brain. Until modern brain research began focusing on emotions, educators did not associate emotions with learning. Now that this connection has been made, it seems obvious that emotions can positively impact the way we learn. “They (the arts) provide rich multisensory experiences that engage the whole mind-body-emotional system” (Dickinson ).

Emotions can be in the form of a positive past experience, or what the drama participants feel when they are actively in role of an imagined figure. “Facts and information become relevant when they are relevant to the lives of the people the students imagine” (Edmiston 4).

### **Hands-on Learning and the Brain**

Not only has it been proven that emotions and personal experiences advance learning, but hands-on approaches to teaching progress learning as well. Studies such as those done by Lynn O'Brien of Specific Diagnostic Studies find that only 15 percent of the population learn the strongest through auditory means. Forty percent of the population learns the strongest through visual means and 45 percent of the population learn best by kinesthetic or hands-on types of teaching. The kinesthetic learners need manipulatives and other hands-on activities to conceptualize and grasp concepts. "Understandably, many of them have difficulty learning in conventional classrooms since very little hands-on learning is available in most classes after early primary grades" (Dickinson 1).

Drama in the classroom can really benefit the kinesthetic learners. Students are almost always moving around and actually creating something using their bodies during drama activities. It would be very typical to an observer of a drama-integrated classroom to see students working together out of their seats. Students may be engaged in creating scenes, producing role-plays, and spontaneously using their imaginations to learn. One might hear a whole class discussion or small group discussions reflecting on experiences. The students are involved and actually doing something in addition to just listening. "Students

have to do something with information they learn, and then they can process information more deeply. Students need to use what they have learned to reinforce it" (Feden 1). Drama is doing just that. It is taking the information and creating something new with it, which makes it relevant to the student. Although it may seem obvious that this type of learning would benefit young children, many classrooms have yet to adopt the model.

Brain research has now proven that children cannot maintain the extensive attention span that some teachers require of their young students. Dr. Perry makes the analogy of the brain fatiguing as a muscle would. "Learning requires attention. And attention is mediated by specific parts of the brain. Yet, neural systems fatigue quickly, actually within minutes. With three to five minutes of sustained activity, neurons become 'less responsive'; they need a rest (not unlike your muscles when you lift weights)" (Perry 1). This is why children will not learn when lectured to over a significant period of time. Their attention is lost, unless they are somehow involved in the learning process. Dr. Bruce Perry goes on to give an example of what would happen to a child who was given facts over a lengthy amount of time. Perry explains what happens to the child in terms of the research done on the brain and learning by exemplifying what is happening in the child's mind:

So, if this child hears only factual information, she will fatigue

within minutes. Only four to eight minutes of pure factual lecture can be tolerated before the brain seeks other stimuli, either internal (e.g., daydreaming) or external (Who is that walking down the hall?). If the teacher is not providing that novelty, the brain will go elsewhere. Continuous presentation of facts or concepts in isolation or in a nonstop series of anecdotes will all have the same fatiguing effect — and the child will not learn as much, nor will she come to anticipate and enjoy learning (1).

Drama, among other hands-on teaching methods, allows students to learn without losing their attention.

### **Conclusion**

Research indicates that drama is effective in teaching the elementary curriculum. It can easily be adapted and integrated to teach all subject areas. It is proven to be successful through personal experiences, recent brain research, and a study of widely accepted learning theories. “Human beings are storytelling primates. We are curious, and we love to learn. The challenge for each teacher is to find ways to engage the child and take advantage of the novelty-seeking property of the human brain to facilitate learning” (Perry 1). This is the reason and the purpose for the research I have done. Today’s education system often put children through unnecessary stress. This stress

translates to a negative attitude towards school and learning. It burns out our natural instinct to want to learn. Learning cannot take place unless the child has a motivation and is stimulated through engaging activities.

Drama gives educators the opportunity to teach their students in a way, which would create a love for learning. It provides valuable problem solving, social, and creative skills. Drama embraces the child's imagination and emotions, which in many classrooms are shunned. The values of drama and all of the arts are indicated in the National Standards for Arts Education. "...Students of the arts disciplines gain powerful tools for: understanding human experiences, both past and present; learning to adapt to and respect other's (often very different) ways of thinking, working and expressing themselves; and making decisions where there are no standard answers" (Martin 30).

Perhaps the most important point of all is that participants of drama are being involved in the learning. They are engaging in activities and immersed in the roles, which they assume. We are naturally equipped with the ability to use drama in our lives. It can be said that drama is a way of life. We use drama from birth to death to overcome difficult situations, prepare ourselves, or learn something new. Drama activates the whole brain and also engages many different kinds of intelligences. It reaches students who need a challenge, as well as

students who are not reached through traditional teaching methods. “Given the importance of the arts in human knowing, especially in light of Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences... it is not surprising that there is a growing body of research and anecdotal evidence that the arts can play important roles in helping *all* students...” (Darby 308).

If educators want to reach their students and teach them in the most effective possible way, then they will integrate drama and the arts into their classroom. The impact that this kind of authentic learning can make on a child is priceless. The cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dexterity that is gained by using drama create motivated, intelligent, life-long learners.

Brian Edmiston sums up the value and power of using drama in the classroom very well. He calls the type of learning in which students are actively engaged in the subject and have some control of their learning, “student inquiry.” He writes:

Organizing the curriculum around student inquiry has begun to be recognized as a powerful way to move students beneath the facts and beyond a skill-and-kill approach to learning. Inquiry that centers on students’ questions and real world issues is intrinsically motivating, engages students in high level critical creative thinking, and connects the classroom to the world—past, present, and future. Teachers are freed from being *the* authority to being

*an* authority who can guide, assist, and wonder with students—  
but most of all we are freed to ask questions *with* students and  
join together in joint explorations (133).

Perhaps someday in the near future classrooms will be littered with  
drama-integrated lessons. Educators will take recent research into  
consideration and build their methods around these new findings.  
Teachers will embrace the world of drama and give their students the  
opportunity to learn in a fun and invited environment. When this day  
comes there will no longer be “three R’s,” but rather “four R’s,” where the  
arts are given equal values as compared to reading, writing, and  
arithmetic. Not only can the arts be an extra enrichment and area of  
study, but they also can be used to teach the curriculum and the  
students.



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