

Drama Pedagogy for Diverse Middle Level Student Populations

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In the period from 1986 to 2001, substantial consistent increases in enrollment in U.S. schools have occurred. The proportion of minority students has even more dramatically increased, reaching 35% of the student population by the end of the 20th century. By 2025 this will most likely reach as high as 50% (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2001).

As the United States school population becomes more diverse, teachers are challenged to provide full access, equality of instruction, and appropriate learning environments leading to academic success to all students. This problem is magnified by the fact that the diversity is broad-based, including ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic differences in school students (Ford, 2003). These differences manifest themselves in the level of preparedness and commitment to stay in school that students bring from home to class, the ability of teachers to reach and motivate students' learning processes, and ultimately the students' level of academic achievement (Joyce & Weil, 2000).

In too many cases, an alarming number of minority students never graduate from high school. One reason may be that as early as the 4th-8th grades, schools have traditionally marginalized and failed to integrate into curriculum the perspectives and interests of ethnic minorities and the economically disadvantaged (Medina, 2001).

New approaches to education for minority students in the middle level grades, emerging from findings of cognitive psychology and from awareness of the influences of students' culture on school performance, suggest new implications for American public education. Possible directions in instructional theory and design include adoption of culturally responsive

classroom practices and the facilitation of students constructing their own knowledge (Miller & Preece, 1999). Educators must also address literacy, among other issues, in order to focus on the culturally diverse students' developmental and learning needs (Jasinski, 2002).

One approach to improving the low achievement of culturally diverse students is through drama pedagogy as a multi-skilled approach to learning that evokes and extends students' cognitive, social, emotional, physical, moral, creative, communicative, and aesthetic abilities (Verriour, 1994). However, for some reason, using drama instruction in elementary classrooms, and not in middle level classrooms, has been the norm. And yet use of drama techniques allows middle school students (whatever their language or socio-economic status) to exercise a great deal of control over the structure, content, and delivery of the presentation of their own issues and responses to instruction in styles of their own (Gay & Hanley, 1999).

Drama requires that students practice skills of community, participation, cooperation, collaboration, problem solving, and decision making. Also, when used to teach ethnic and culturally diverse middle school students, drama provides a safe arena in which highly complex and problematic issues can be examined in depth (Gay & Hanley, 1999). This is the case, whether the content of a class is history/social studies (Goalen & Hendy, 1993; Fennessey, 1995; Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998), science and health (Kamen, 1991; Richardson et al. 2002), language arts (Baxter, 1999; Rowe, 1998), mathematics (Griffin, 2001) or second languages (Ralph, 1997; Makita-Discekici, 1999).

Review of Literature

Any comprehensive Drama-as-Inquiry Program to be used in a middle level classroom is developed with certain underlying assumptions by its author. One general assumption might be that some academic skill of a student is enhanced or improved.

In a study looking at the relationships between imagery and reading comprehension, memory and cognition, and elaboration and meaning-based memory, the authors used a reading through drama program that employed drama techniques consistent with the research on imagery and memory (Rose, et.al., 2000). The comprehensive drama program consisted of four stages: story, sequence, perception, and evaluation. Fourth grade students--drawn from diverse racial groups and national backgrounds, and all living in low-income urban neighborhoods--in several schools in a large Midwestern city-- participated in a randomized control-group design study. Results showed that when compared to traditional text-based methods on the basis of reading and completing workbook activities such as fill-in-the-blank and complete-the-sentence questions about the text, the drama-based instruction program's students showed more improvement in reading comprehension scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills.

In a case study of seventh grade social studies students in inner city school whose teacher used drama as a dominant method of instruction, students engaged in dramatic activities to learn history and improve their abilities to evaluate evidence and concepts, as well as to visualize a future. Results showed that when dramatic performance was a form of instruction, the students' critical thinking skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, sharply increased over a long period of time (Morris, 2001).

In one study set in a mid-western American city, a teacher used drama as a pedagogical strategy with fifth grade Hispanic language arts students to find more effective ways to begin critical dialogue about a book's key issues (Medina, 2001). Students accomplished the desired goal by creating tableaus representing key moments in a story, and by taking on different roles of key characters. Results indicated that the drama strategies facilitated the students' "negotiation of complex interpretations of the text" (Medina, p.200).

It is always helpful when a comprehensive instructional strategy thought to be beneficial to students can be successfully

taught to teachers who may use the strategy. This is not always the case, and sometimes such efforts hinder, rather than enhance, opportunities for students to improve their academic skills (VanTassel-Baska, 1997). One successful program has been developed by the author of the present article.

Drama As Inquiry Program (DAIP)

The author has developed the Drama As Inquiry Program (DAIP) as an instructional strategy for teachers of diverse student populations. The program was based on classic and traditional drama-in-education programs initially devised by Shaftel and Shaftel (1982), and Heinig (1993). It was originally developed for and used by middle school and upper elementary urban inner-city students in three Southwestern U.S. cities. Students with learning disabilities, in gifted and talented programs, and who were in math and social studies classes, participated in various formats of the program in regular classroom, after-school, or weekend educational settings. Report of the drama program and successful teacher training was made (McGregor, 1999,2003). Results of studies implementing the program in high school and college classrooms have also been reported (McGregor, 2000, 2001, 2002).

DAIP provides the teacher of diverse student populations in middle level educational settings with a conceptual and practical framework with which to facilitate the teaching of course content. The six-part program provides students with language development, personal understanding, and communication skills, while deepening the learning process of the topics at hand. After all, one of the results of using drama-as-inquiry in a middle level classroom is that students of varying abilities and backgrounds achieve high levels of conceptual understanding of content. Using drama in instruction, teachers can help these students achieve higher level understanding than students in classes featuring more

conventional teaching strategies (Goal en & Hendy, 1993, Heinig, 1993).

Drama As Inquiry Program: The Six Parts

Part One: Research. The students engage in individual/independent research on the topic at hand. This stage allows the student to include the researching of personal, family, or community concepts or ideas that may add to the understanding of the topic. The students then engage in structured group research on the topic. The teacher guides this phase and requires a paper product for assessment.

Part Two: Dramatic Activities: Through individual, paired, small group, or whole class participation, activities may include pantomime, guided fantasy, improvisation, role-play, storytelling, and other dramatic activities. Activities can be integrated with other instructional methods on a daily basis or occur as special events.

Part Three: Original Playwriting: Students learn to outline a story plot, select settings in time, and create characters. They then integrate plot, setting, and characters into an individual original skit/play which represents their individual interpretation and expression of the material learned about the topic.

Part Four: Play Production: Students design (a set if appropriate, costuming, sound, props, make-up) a production of the skit/play.

Part Five: Play Promotion: Students (and teacher) choose a venue for the presentation of the skits/plays and make all necessary preparations which may include advertising, ticket sales, programs, and school/parent/community involvement.

Part Six: Play Presentation: This may occur in front of the class, for other students in other classrooms, in front of the school, as an evening performance, etc. The idea is for the student to

participate in an authentic experience that combines academic and real-life application.

As can be seen, any or all of the parts of the program may be used. However, it has been shown that it is the comprehensive, authentically articulated instructional programs that have the most benefit. This is particularly true when assessing the middle level student's improvement in knowledge and skills in any given content area (Schurr, 1998; Morris, 2001), as well as the metacognitive processes involved in the student's thinking, judgments, and problem solving (Curren, 1995). It is also very beneficial to middle level students to experience reflection of a didactic subject through a complete dramatic process (Lev-Aladgem, 2000).

Conclusion

Middle level students are engaged in different types of explorations for self-definition, self-expression, and even self-creation. They can find classrooms to be embarrassing or inhibiting environments in which to seek and express identification with the academic world around them. Drama pedagogy as an instructional method is well suited to counteract that tendency through its interpersonal and intrapersonal nature.

The empowerment that enables an adolescent student to successfully cross the many boundaries of life--intellectual, social, emotional, moral, physical, ethnic, and cultural--results from teaching and learning. The power of using drama in the teaching and learning process can increase student motivation and reduce the number of doors that slam shut in the faces of middle level students as they transition to their next challenges in life.

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