A Case Study of Drama Education for Kindergarten Children in the United States: Drama Specialists’ Beliefs and Practices

Su-Jeong Wee
Purdue University Calumet

This case study examines two drama specialists’ perspectives on the purpose of drama education and how their visions and beliefs are reflected in their drama practices during a six-week kindergarten drama program. Two experienced drama specialists who have worked at public elementary schools located in the Midwestern United States were the main participants of this case study. Using a qualitative case study method, in-depth observations and semi-structured interviews were carried out. Findings show that the drama specialists believed the purpose of drama education to be the building of self-confidence, creativity, awareness of the arts and respect for others. Both congruent and inconsistent relations between their beliefs and their teaching practices were observed. Based on these findings, an understanding of how specialists’ beliefs and practices contribute to a broader understanding of drama education is further discussed.

Keywords: drama education, drama specialist, teacher’s belief, teacher’s practice, kindergarten drama

Each school subject has its unique essential forms of cognition and discipline (Efland, 1990) and drama is no exception. The discipline of drama education consists of extensive specialized knowledge and holds its own ways of knowing. Classroom teachers usually teach drama to their students but not all teachers are trained in it. By examining beliefs and practices of drama specialists who are considered to have professional knowledge and rich field experience, classroom teachers can be informed of what should be considered important in drama education and how it should be taught in developmentally appropriate ways.

Although the terms “drama education” and “theatre education” have been commonly used interchangeably, there is a technical difference between the two. Drama education emphasizes participants’ exploratory and meaning-making process, whereas theatre education highlights training for formal performance (Schonmann, 2000). Drama education is particularly important for young children because they learn about their world using their senses and motors/movements, which are the main tools of drama education (Osmond, 2007; Young, 2004). Drama can help introduce young children to the world around them and face the necessities of taking into account what others think, feel, and say because it involves working with others and acting out life issues (Mages, 2006; O’Neill, 1994; Richard, 1998). Drama activities provide
children with opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings by using all of these senses and to develop their own perceptions about themselves and the world around them (Furman, 2002; Szecsi, 2008).

Many scholars have supported children’s participation in school drama activities because drama provides an opportunity to facilitate children’s social, emotional, linguistic, and intellectual development as well as to encourage creativity (Kelin, 2007; Mages, 2008). Specifically, drama is believed to have a positive impact on language development, oral and written fluency, critical thinking, literature comprehension, attitude toward English and Language arts, and literature appreciation (Barnes, Johnson, & Neff, 2010; Chan, 2009; Dorion, 2009; Wagner, 1998). In spite of its important role in contributing to children’s learning and development, drama is usually marginalized or absent from the curriculum, especially in the current school climate that emphasizes academic accountability (Bresler, 2002; O’Toole & O’Mara, 2007). There is little time allotted in the daily routine for drama in early childhood settings due to the pressure that many teachers feel to cover too much material in too little time (Dean et al., 2007; Jones & Reynolds, 1992). In such an educational climate, drama has often been conceptualized as a means to support learning other subject matter areas rather than as a foundation subject (Hatcher & Petty, 2004; Mages, 2008; National Curriculum Council, 1990). Accordingly, in most cases, drama has been seen as a teaching method, which leads to missing its own discipline knowledge. Especially in such an educational environment, it is critical to examine how drama is taught to young children in an effort to find out where the focus of drama is placed on.

Schonmann (2000) classifies three interrelated orientations in the field of drama education: (a) the artistic-aesthetic, (b) the pedagogical-educational, and (c) the sociological-cultural, claiming that drama education in schools as a field for teaching and learning includes both the aesthetic and the utilitarian. First, regarding the artistic-aesthetic, drama is an art form that addresses the senses and awareness of the individual. Students learn to use drama language and achieve new modes of communication by participating in drama. The aesthetic functions of drama help students to understand the nature of drama as an art form and to make judgments which contribute to the understanding of the process and product. Next, the pedagogical-educational orientation is to teach drama in a practical way, helping students develop an identity with characters and situations. In a climate free from fear and shame, students must be allowed to develop their self-identity, strengthen their self-image, build their self-confidence and share their emotions. Last, the sociological-cultural orientation in drama education addresses drama as a social art form, demanding the construction of meaning for both individuals and for society. Drama has been very close to the process of ritual and to the structure and motifs of critical events in the social and political arenas (O’Farrell, 1995). These three orientations in drama education are not separate but interrelated with each other in that drama education operates within an artistic medium and drama as pedagogy cannot be separated from drama as art. These orientations will be considered here in examining how drama is taught and practiced.

Another important issue to consider in drama education is that most American early childhood educators are not trained in drama education, which consists of specialized discipline-based knowledge (Wee, 2009). Limited financial resources, scarcity of state-mandated curriculum guides (Dean, Brown, & Young, 2007), and teachers’ concerns about the vast amount of preparation time needed (McMaster, 1998) are reported to hinder classroom teachers from incorporating drama in their curriculum. Drama specialists are assumed to have greater professional knowledge of drama than generalists and as a result of this knowledge they teach drama in a different way than generalists. Thus, examining the teaching methods and approaches of drama specialists can help early childhood educators understand specialized teaching practices of drama.