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**Taking the LEAP: Marrying Literacy Enhancement, Artistry and
Performance**

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Abstract

L.E.A.P.: Literacy Enhancement, Artistry, and Performance is a Community Service Initiative that promotes storytelling through theater to improve literacy rates in low-income schools. The program utilizes the Reader's Theater technique, which involves students reading aloud scripts from books at their grade level. The program integrates the performing arts into literacy curriculums to provide hands-on learning experiences that can lead to exploratory learning. This paper examines the importance of literacy and the role of theater in supporting the cognitive development of struggling readers. It also explores how Reader's Theater can be implemented in the classroom to improve reading fluency and attitude towards reading. This paper concludes that

literacy is crucial for personal, social, and economic benefits and that theater is a powerful tool for promoting literacy and improving the well-being of children.

Introduction

In the third grade, I wrote an essay about my trips to the library. I noted that “reading lets you go anywhere in the world without ever leaving home”. Only a block from our house, my father took me there every week, and it was the very first place that I rode my bike to by myself. I would spend hours. When at the library, I was living my life without limits. The entire world was at my fingertips. My parents integrated storytelling into my life at a very young age. My father read to me every night when I was younger, and he continues to read to our family every Christmas Eve. We would write stories and songs together. Suddenly, the hearth of the fireplace became a stage. It was there where I played every Von Trapp child at once, I performed concerts nightly, and my self-written stories premiered.

Studies show that students in drama groups receive significantly higher scores in composition writing because theatre allows students to immerse themselves in true-to-life experiences through problem-solving, creating dialogue, and working out social problems, all of which lead to exploratory learning. Elementary schools have a dire need to integrate the performing arts into their literacy curriculums. This need has led me to create my Community Service Initiative, L.E.A.P.: Literacy Enhancement, Artistry and Performance, which encourages young children to explore storytelling as a whole. This initiative marries the two subjects that most low-income schools lack but

need the most: on-track literacy levels and arts programs. Because of L.E.A.P., I envision a world where children of all colors, abilities, shapes, and sizes gather to share universal truths, where arts and literacy fuel hopes and dreams, and heal divided communities through storytelling.

The truth is, New Jersey has the fifth lowest literacy rate in the country, and I have made it my mission to improve that statistic through my Community Service Initiative. Increased involvement in the theatre will help to lower this number because the ability to “act it out” helps students better understand the words on the page. L.E.A.P. celebrates a unique style of learning and brings stories from the page to the stage for students who learn through visual and hands-on elements.

Since I started L.E.A.P, I have exposed hundreds of children to the performing arts by organizing field trips for elementary-age children to see live theatre. I have created a lesson that explores the Reader’s Theater strategy, which combines reading practice and performing. This increases class participation state-wide and contributes to the student’s well-being, social skills, and overall interaction with others that they have been detached from since the Covid-19 Pandemic.

In this capstone, we will dive into a multitude of studies, including a graduate research paper written by Adrianna D. Cavanaugh at the University of Northern Iowa. This study explores the reader’s theatre technique, and how implementing it in the classroom can positively affect a student’s reading fluency. It was completed over two school years, following the progress of four students with low literacy levels. The study shows that readers' theatre created a positive influence on reading fluency and attitudes.

Cavanaugh, Adrianna D., "Using readers theaters to help students develop reading fluency" (2013). Graduate Research Papers. 41.

Theatre, specifically Reader's Theatre is what children need right now to live a collaborative and artful childhood and life. In Reader's Theatre, students "perform" by reading scripts created from books of their grade level. This strategy has many benefits. It improves a student's reading ability and attitude toward reading because of the repetition and exposure to text. Not only do students have the opportunity to read aloud, but teachers can listen to their oral reading and analyze the student's reading fluency.

I have proposed my fundraising and marketing portfolios to The National Endowment for the Arts and The American Reading Company in search of partnerships to take my initiative to a national level. I am also in the process of registering as a non-profit organization and publishing my readers-theater script to accompany my workshops.

The following research is structured around the succeeding questions:

1. Why is literacy important?
2. How can theater support the cognitive development of struggling readers?
3. How can we implement Readers Theatre in the classroom?

Theater is literacy. It is the secret ingredient to improving literacy worldwide. I have seen this story. In fact, I have lived it. Creativity is an important skill to be successful, and the key is to allow one to exercise their imagination through storytelling. The next generation lies in our hands, and our first step in preparing them for success is to take the L.E.A.P. and advocate for literacy.

Why is literacy important?

Literacy is important for a variety of reasons, including personal, social, and economic benefits. Here are a few reasons why literacy is crucial:

1. **Personal Empowerment:** Literacy skills provide individuals with the ability to read, write, and communicate effectively. This allows them to make informed decisions, express themselves, and participate in society in meaningful ways.
2. **Education and Learning:** Literacy skills are fundamental to accessing education and learning. Without adequate literacy skills, individuals may struggle to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for success in life.
3. **Improved Health:** Literacy skills are also linked to better health outcomes. Literate individuals are better able to access health information, understand medical instructions, and make informed health decisions for themselves and their families.
4. **Economic Prosperity:** Literacy skills are essential for economic prosperity. In today's knowledge-based economy, literacy skills are necessary for success in the workplace and for economic advancement.
5. **Social and Civic Engagement:** Literacy skills also enable individuals to participate in social and civic life. Literate individuals are better able to engage with their communities, participate in democratic processes, and contribute to the common good.

Overall, literacy is a fundamental skill that is essential for personal and societal well-being and is necessary for individuals to reach their full potential.

“Reading fluency is the ability to read a text with speed and accuracy, recognizing each word effortlessly and beginning to construct meaning from each word and a group of words as they read” (Corcoran, C. A. (2005). “A study of the effects of readers' theater on second and third grade special education students' fluency growth.”) Corcoran explains that approximately seventy-five percent of illiterate third grade students go on to become poor readers in adulthood, which is why it is so important to hone in on reading comprehension at an early age in order to develop as a well-rounded society.

How can theatre support the cognitive development of struggling readers?

Participation in the theatre assists students in reading fluency and comprehension. The performing arts allow students to excel in literature selection, development and understanding of plot and character, and so much more. Readers Theatre greatly supports the literacy development of young readers, and we can see that in Cavanaugh's thesis. It gives students a reason to read. Readers Theater uses guidance, modeling, and independent student practice. Students can use a poem, play, speech, or other appropriate text to rehearse. Students should practice their text until they can perform it fluently, and with expression for an audience (Corcoran, 2005). In addition, teachers must listen to their students read aloud to assess their overall progress and needs.

Readers Theatre doesn't just improve reading skills, it also allows students to excel in their other classes as well. Using non-fiction texts in Readers Theatre also has

its benefits, and they could even be more effective than a textbook. Including nonfiction works into a curriculum lies an excellent opportunity to link reading for pleasure with reading for information in the content areas (Cavanaugh, 2013), leading to not only the student's ability to read the words on the page more fluently, but to understand the words and retain information. Non-fiction texts such as Readers Theatre pieces are more inviting and student-friendly than a textbook, and allows students to read text that is up-to-date and accurate.

How can educators implement Readers Theater in the classroom?

Various literacy skills can be taught in the classroom through theatrical texts. In a study provided by A. B. Harrington in 2018, a sample piece of Readers Theatre is linked as a resource for educators.

“The renowned American actress, theater practitioner, and teacher, Uta Hagen (1973), always asked her actors to complete a series of questions about their character and the world of the play to help them think more fully about their character's life and motivations, but also to help them develop the metacognition in understanding the character choices they were beginning to make already. These nine questions are: *Who am I? What time is it? Where am I? What surrounds me? What are the given circumstances? What is my relationship with the other characters? What do I want? What is in my way? What do I do to get what I want?*” (Harrington, A. B. (2018). *Using Theater to Promote the Development of Literacy and Reading Comprehension*. New York: Bank Street College of Education.)

These questions are rather extensive; I did not quite visit them until I entered my collegiate acting courses, however, they can be developed or asked in ways to meet the needs of certain age groups or reading levels. By answering these questions, students can understand the background of their character, their motives, and the world of the story, therefore strengthening their comprehension. This allows them to use their imagination and create a rich life for their character, no matter how big or small. Through reading aloud, students are allowed to make choices: What lines are read a little louder or softer? Does the character use a sad or happy tone? What words are emphasized in the sentence?

Cara Bafle gave a detailed description of tips, tricks, and methods for educators to include readers theater in their curriculums:

“Start slowly and spend the time necessary so students feel comfortable in the performance mode. Provide opportunities for students to practice. Students do not memorize their parts; they always read from their scripts. Students simply stand or sit in a semicircle. Model each character's part and match roles to readers. Combine parts if there are too many. Work with small groups, not with the whole class, whenever possible. Provide instructional support for new vocabulary and for understanding the different characters.” Bafle, C. (2005). Reader’ s theater: giving students a reason to read aloud. LD Online. <http://ldonline.org/article/39>.

The final bullet, “provide instructional support for new vocabulary and for understanding the different characters”, aligns with Uta Hagen’s nine questions (*Hagen, Uta. “Respect for Acting.” Wiley, 1973.*)

In addition, physical gestures give the student the chance to walk around or move throughout the piece. The kinesthetic act of movement allows the students to identify a visual trigger with the words on the page, connecting with the literary demands and assisting the students in retaining the information.

Diving deeper into a reading performance allows students to better identify the words on the page. Asking questions about a character or a story further involves the students and gives them a purpose. Louise Rosenblatt explored this technique in her “transactional theory”. Rosenblatt was an American literary theorist and education scholar, known for her work on the process of reading and interpretation. Her "transactional theory," emphasizes the active and subjective nature of the reading process. Rosenblatt's theory of aesthetic reading posits that reading is an active process that involves both the text and the reader's personal experience and interpretation. This approach can also be applied to the experience of attending a live theater performance.

According to Rosenblatt, the viewer's subjective response to the play is just as important as the objective qualities of the performance. Aesthetic reading of a play involves engaging with the themes, characters, and events of the play through the lens of one's own experiences and emotions. This subjective interpretation allows the viewer to create personal meaning and significance from the play. When watching a live performance, the viewer can engage with the play on a visceral level, experiencing the emotions of the characters and the drama of the story. This emotional engagement allows the viewer to connect with the play and create a personal interpretation that is uniquely their own.

In this sense, Rosenblatt's theory of aesthetic reading emphasizes the importance of personal response and interpretation in understanding and appreciating theater. By allowing for subjective interpretation, viewers can connect with the play on a deeper level and derive personal meaning and significance from the performance.

Justification

I have a personal connection to “L.E.A.P.”, due to my own story and passion for literature. From second grade until now, I was in the “gifted” English classes, and I owe all of my success in that area to being introduced to theatre at an early age. Because I was able to “act” stories out, I was reading above my grade level due to using hands-on and visual elements. I suppose you could say that my involvement in the theatre has led me to have the ability to participate in The Baccalaureate Honors Program! I feel inclined to include this information and my studies on the importance of theatre education on my website and throughout my career because it has shaped me into the artist I am today, and motivates me to use my passions for the greater good.

The BHP program has helped me exercise my interdisciplinary skills and critical thinking and analysis, which has benefited me in approaching songs as text, a crucial skill in the theatre industry and when performing. In fact, this capstone itself is interdisciplinary: it’s a requirement for both the BHP capstone and the Musical Theatre Program, and it allows me to work in the theatre, the nonprofit sector, and educational institutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, literacy is essential to personal empowerment, education, health, economic prosperity, and social and civic engagement. In this paper, we have explored how theatre, specifically Reader's Theatre, can support the cognitive development of struggling readers and help improve literacy rates. The L.E.A.P. initiative is an excellent example of how the performing arts can be integrated into literacy curriculums to benefit children of all backgrounds and abilities. Through the use of Reader's Theatre, students can improve their reading fluency and attitudes towards reading, while also developing social and problem-solving skills. The success of L.E.A.P. demonstrates the power of creative thinking and storytelling in preparing the next generation for success. It is our responsibility to advocate for literacy and take the necessary steps to support the development of these essential skills.

References

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