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The Head and The Heart:

Drama Play and Shakespeare Curriculum for Young Children

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the benefits of drama play and Shakespeare curriculum for young children, ages five to nine. The history of America's relationship to Shakespeare and the current obstacles to enjoying it are discussed within. The author also discusses why Common Core State Standards (CCSS) isn't a good fit for young children; but drama play and Shakespeare curriculum can be helpful in meeting CCSS requirements.

Two research examples involving success with drama play for English/Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics are shared, followed by practical examples of the use of Shakespeare curriculum in the classroom. Finally, there is a discussion of emotional and social health benefits provided by drama play and Shakespeare curriculum as teaching tools for young children.

## The Head and The Heart:

### Drama Play and Shakespeare Curriculum for Young Children

In Act IV of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero says the famous line: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep." This was Shakespeare's final play and perhaps this line sums up his philosophy of life: potential dwells inside each of us, but we have a short amount of time to fulfill it. The dreams of young children need time and space to grow, but reveries have been replaced by tight schedules and tests that are meant to keep young minds moving toward advanced scholastic goals. It is important to protect and nurture the power of imagination and play so that young children can better balance the academic demands that are placed upon them. Knowledge of Shakespeare's characters, stories and famous phrases can provide young children with a framework that complements their academic education and aids their social and emotional health. In our modern world, where adults collectively joke that it feels like they are missing a limb when they misplace their smart phones, how do we create a generation of children that are successful academically, but also have the wisdom to know when it is appropriate to put down their screens and be present: expressing empathy and a desire to be in community with their peers? It is

admirable to strive for academic awards, but those prizes are empty unless emotional and social skills are also developed along the way. An introduction to Shakespeare curriculum and drama play can set the stage for successful academic, emotional and social development in children, ages five to nine.

### **A LITTLE HISTORY**

*"True is it that we have seen better days." - As You Like It*

The problem with Shakespeare is that it currently exists in a polarized state in American culture. It is either revered as a lofty, exclusive, "British" experience or vilified as boring, difficult and out of date. Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is a rapidly evolving academic initiative recently embraced by most of the United States. The current expectations for each grade level in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics are listed on the CCSS website, where it is expressed in the Literature portion of ELA that teachers should introduce poetry in grade 1 and plays in grades 2 and 3. Yet, it does not mention Shakespeare in the ELA Literature curriculum until grades 11 – 12, when teachers are asked to present one Shakespeare play: just *one* in their students' entire school experience. An earlier, less intimidating introduction could curtail the expected resistance that many students express at the high school level.

There isn't any reason why children as young as age five can't enjoy the magical stories, rhymes and rhythms of

Shakespeare. In fact, children that have an early familiarity have a lucky edge, indeed. Modern music, television shows, movies, and advertisements reference Shakespeare far more than the average person realizes. Well-known phrases that Shakespeare invented or made popular in his plays (such as "a charmed life", "dead as a doornail," and "wild goose chase") have become so expertly woven into our own speech that we take their roots for granted. In contrast, immediate familiarity was common when America was still in its infancy. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) provides a timeline of Shakespeare's fall from grace in America on their Teacher's Resource website, *Shakespeare in American Communities*. In the 1800s, most households prided themselves on owning a Bible and at least a few copies of Shakespeare's plays. However, at the turn of the century, America's interest in Shakespeare decreased sharply as the Industrial Revolution took hold. Suddenly, strong laborers were of more value to families than scholars with elocution skills.

Today, the ambitious requirements of CCSS leave little time for teachers and children to tarry in the works of Shakespeare. Yet, by using Shakespeare curriculum and drama play with young children, time can be freed up in the upper grade levels for meeting the CCSS requirements. By setting up familiarity with heightened language at an early age, students can jump into text analysis more readily. They also acquire confidence by taking

risks and experience a sense of community in the classroom by playing together as an ensemble of storytellers. These are just a few valuable examples of reaching the end goals of CCSS by working smarter on the front end with this dynamic approach. As a bonus, it can ignite future artists, teachers, entrepreneurs, philosophers and leaders to their life callings.

### **WHY DO WE THINK SHAKESPEARE IS TOO HARD?**

***“It is required you do awake your faith.” - The Winter’s Tale***

Shakespeare curriculum is often avoided with young children because it is perceived as too advanced. Some of the plays also raise uncomfortable ethical questions that are deemed too mature for young minds. However, in *Why Shakespeare Should Be Child’s Play*, a 2014 online article for *The Telegraph*, Gregory Doran, Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), insists that heightened language is not a problem for children, and that life lessons can be learned from the plays:

What Shakespeare is brilliant at is speaking to a lot of audiences at the same time and we can appreciate it on many different levels. And it doesn’t just have to be *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or *Romeo and Juliet*. With my own experience of getting to know Shakespeare as a child, I was grabbed by the stories first of all. Then you grow up and become engaged by the language. But it’s more than just good stories and nice language.

It's about ethics and morality.

Jacqui O'Hanlon, the RSC's director of education, adds:

Even for the youngest children, it is all Shakespeare's language. [At RSC performances for children, we] are never, ever working with translation. They don't want to be patronised. When you're at primary school, nobody has told you Shakespeare is difficult. The earlier we start with children, the more is possible. And there isn't a play that you can't do.

If the RSC, widely considered the leading expert in maintaining Shakespeare's legacy, insists that the language and morality of Shakespeare's plays are not insurmountable, why is it so difficult for Americans to embrace these plays for young children's instruction? There are several modern roadblocks that require navigation by teachers, parents and children.

*Teaching Morality in Schools*. Dr. Thomas Lickona, author of *Educating For Character, How Our School Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*, writes that "greed and materialism" and "mass media" are big problems for children today and that now is the time for schools to step in and address "ethical illiteracy"(5). Lickona explains that "values education" fell out of favor in the 1960s when the civil rights movement introduced a new way of thinking - "personalism" - in which "people began to regard any

kind of constraint on their personal freedom as an intolerable restriction of their individuality" (9). Personalism might be the reason why teachers do not feel comfortable broaching moral or ethical quandaries in the classroom for fear of being accused of trying to teach their own values. Yet, Lickona states, "If questions of right and wrong are never discussed in classrooms, that, too, teaches a lesson about how much morality matters" (21). Teachers that have a desire to discuss ethics and morality often find two linked obstacles: "inappropriate academic pressures, and a preoccupation with test scores as a measure of school success" (Lickona 344). Lickona points out that certain character traits are undervalued and that no one publishes "students' human decency scores in the town newspaper. But these days, a school's scores on statewide achievement tests often do get published...(and) become the tail that wags the educational dog" (345). Lickona champions the use of epic literature as a springboard for moral guidance in the classroom (60). But why is Shakespeare such a good fit for young children? Plays allow children an edifying social experience that is more active than reading alone or having a piece of literature read to them.

*Culture of Materialism.* Author Sarah Clarkson further develops Lickona's ideas in her book, *Caught up in a Story: Fostering a Storyformed Life of Great Books & Imagination with Your Children.* Clarkson touts a "culture of materialism" as one of the biggest



obstacles children must overcome today (22). "The one who dies with the most toys, wins" is not just a cheeky bumper sticker anymore. It is a pervasive attitude in American culture that celebrates the procurement and staging of possessions. If you have a big house, lots of designer clothing, a social media account full of vacation pictures in exotic places, you must be doing all right. For people that buy into this lifestyle, it seems right to push children to excel in school - not because learning is fun, but because it is important to strategize in order to reap potential wins in the future. Encouraging children to work hard is a noble pursuit, but solely focusing on a coveted spot at a prestigious school or access to posh social circles is misplaced. The calculated message to stack up awards and achievements *now* in order to cash in on them *later* is a flat-out lie, for no one's future is absolutely certain. Anyone can "have it all" and then lose it. In fact, many of Shakespeare's most thrilling tales hinge on this dramatic sweep. Our culture of materialism informs children that their drive should mean more than their dreams:

We live by a relentless cultural drive to produce and perform that causes us to focus children, even at an early age, on practical rather than imaginative activities...We devalue times of quiet, contemplation, or fancy as impractical because they do not produce

results in the outer world..We forget altogether that it is in great works of art that we glimpse at what it means to be human, to suffer, to love, and to hope for redemption (Clarkson 22).

*Bombardment of Technology.* Clarkson addresses the recent explosion of personal devices as problematic (23). Clarkson warns, "When children learn early in their lives to depend on technology for entertainment and information, they lose the habit of imagination" (23). The passivity of technology can keep children from exercising their own autonomy. Imagination is "vital to the formation of a strong interior self...(a child) who has never developed a sense of self and what he wants to become, will be dependent on others to dictate what his actions, what his story, should be" (Clarkson 24). Children need to know how to use technology in today's world, but too much screen time reinforces materialism and the need for validation by others. In addition, it removes children from face-to-face interaction and hinders their awareness of non-verbal communication.

#### **WHAT CAN WE DO TO CHANGE OUR PERSPECTIVE?**

*"We know what we are, but know not what we may be." – Hamlet*

This is where the satisfying art of storytelling and drama play can provide a return on investment for CCSS requirements in later schooling. By using drama play - a child-led, "on your feet" learning style - teachers can introduce text from

Shakespeare to young children in ways that make them feel competent. Whether it be a drum circle of famous lines in iambic pentameter, playing a royalty game in which the children present their own creative bows every time they hear a character say "My Lord" or "Your Majesty," or acting out a scene in their own words, drama play with prompts from Shakespeare can give children a solid foundation for learning and the feeling of belonging to something bigger than themselves.

Drama play fills a longing in the hearts of children. They gravitate to little kitchens, drivable cars, and other toys that mimic adult props of life because playing helps them figure out, as Shakespeare said it best, their "brave new world".

Storytelling, which goes hand in hand with drama, is an ancient ritual in which elders pass on information to their mentees. It is something we long for even before we can articulate *why* we need it in our lives. Toddlers bring books to the adults in their lives and plead to hear stories over and over. Adults, likewise, light up when you ask them about their favorite childhood books. Stories are passed from generation to generation and help us define ourselves in relation to the world around us. When someone exclaims, "That book is my favorite!" they are truly revealing their heart.

Drama play and storytelling can be a fantastic way for teachers to boost academic and social confidence in young

children. In Richard J. Deasy's compendium, *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*, author Jennifer Ross Goodman shares her study that was carried out with 17 children in a preschool classroom serving a college campus (*A Naturalistic Study of the Relationship Between Literacy Development and Dramatic Play in Five-Year-Old Children*). The children were encouraged in drama play every day for five months. The researchers found that the children's favorite stories often became the unofficial "scripts" for their playtime at recess, as they collaborated and re-enacted scenes from stories that had just been read to them in class. The teachers brought this child-led activity into the classroom and loosely guided it as drama play. They observed the children's literacy skills vastly improving during the five-month period. The children began to use correct narrative sequence, initiated the writing of their own scripts and exhibited an understanding of, "establishing settings, characters, relationships between characters, and plot" (Deasy 37). What's more, with the teachers in an observational position, the children felt safe to take risks and enjoy a sense of power. The report notes:

Literacy objects (written or symbolic objects such as a ticket or a map) were perceived as giving power to the possessor (the child with the map was allowed to direct the play). Moreover, literacy in the form of

detailed understanding of the texts appeared to give power to playwrights...and appears to elevate their social status within the classroom. (Deasy 37)

Drama play allows children to try on the adult world without feeling like they have to do it right in order to earn a good grade. They can express deep parts of themselves as they step into characters and play out intense situations. Best of all, it's free. Children need not worry about their economic status or fret about expensive equipment in order to participate in putting on a play. Drama play is a wonderful solution to the "culture of materialism" and "bombardment of technology" that Clarkson is concerned about. And if schools are willing to embrace this alternative learning tool and allot their most precious resource – time – to drama play, there isn't a single school in America that can't afford or benefit from it.

#### **INTEGRATING PLAY WITH NEW YORK CITY ACADEMIC STANDARDS**

*"How far that little candle throws his beams!" – The Merchant of Venice*

CCSS is the current curriculum choice by the New York State Education Department. It is extremely detailed in ELA and Mathematics goals, with every grade level reaching toward data-collecting tests. Opinions about CCSS run the gamut, and many early childhood educators are frustrated with trying to meet the requirements with young students. Valerie Strauss, education reporter for *The Washington Post*, exposed an important reason

why CCSS should not be a part of early childhood education in her January 2013 online article, *A Tough Critique of Common Core on Early Childhood Education*. Strauss reviewed the committees that created CCSS and found, "in all, there were 135 people on those panels. Not a single one of them was a K-3 classroom teacher or early childhood professional." In a follow-up online article in May 2014 (*6 Reasons to Reject Common Core K-3 Standards and 6 Rules to Guide Policy*) she reported on the severe criticism that the creators of CCSS received for the implementation of the K-3 standards and points out that one of the main errors is the assumption that, "all children develop and learn skills at the same rate and in the same way." She cites examples of two early childhood progressions:

Some children can begin to walk as early as 9 months. And others not until 15 months – and all of this falls within a normal range. Early walkers are not better walkers than late walkers. A second example is that the average age at which children learn to read independently in 6.5 years. Some begin as early as 4 years and some not until age 7 or later – and all of this falls within a normal range.

According to EngageNY.org, the website detailing CCSS curriculum in New York, Kindergarten teachers are asked to spend 35 of their reading lessons on assessments, which include tracking and

diagnostics. Following the logic of Strauss' examples: if early walkers aren't better walkers, then early readers aren't necessarily better readers. An approach that embraces drama play in early schooling would allow children to show us their proficiencies on their timeline, not ours.

Philosopher Michael S. Pritchard explains a major problem with excessive testing for young children in his book, *Reasonable Children: Moral Education and Moral Learning*.

Pritchard points out that there is pressure on teachers and school administrators to show the public some proof of constant improvement. This causes teachers to rush their lessons and "teach to the test", resulting in children that know how to give the "one correct answer" required, but lack the onus to think critically and speak out about other creative ways to answer (68). The Alliance for Childhood, a non-profit organization that, "promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living" as a part of their mission statement, reminds parents in their online brochure, *Tips for Parents: When Kindergarten Testing is Out of Hand*, that "many educators oppose the testing of young children but don't speak out against it because they may be accused of being against rigor or accountability." The Alliance for Childhood encourages parents to step in and advocate on the behalf of teachers who may feel like they can't speak out. They

issued a *Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Educational Professionals on the Common Core Standards Initiative* in March 2010 that was signed by 138 prominent leaders in early childhood education, psychology, research, school administration, science and pediatrics. This document called out the "didactic instruction" and "inappropriate standardize testing" of CCSS as a bad fit for grades K-3. The Alliance for Childhood's stance is that children should not be tested before the age of eight and that placing young children into learning tracks is a violation of their rights and doesn't take into account, "things that are very important but hard to measure, like play skills, self-control, cooperation, physical development, creativity and love of learning."

*An Academic Boost with Drama Play.* Whether you support it or not, CCSS is the standard that early childhood educators are being asked to meet at this time. So, how can Shakespeare and drama play meet these ELA and Mathematics requirements? Freelance Teaching Artist Katherine Puma, who is based in New York City and teaches students of all ages, advocates approaching young children with simplicity and a sense of wonder and play:

For the littlest kids, I have a William Shakespeare puppet, and I take him around the room and let him meet and shake hands with each child. As we work together, whether it's for a few weeks or months, I



pepper my lessons with facts about Shakespeare and life in Elizabethan times that they can relate to. My goal is to plant little seeds, so when they meet Shakespeare again, usually in high school, there is a sense of fond familiarity instead of fear.

Puma enthusiastically reports success with call and response exercises, such as Puck's line in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Teacher: "How now spirits,"

Children: "Wither wander you?"

Ms. Puma's favorite plays to work on with young children include *The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Macbeth*. Puma takes a personal boundary with the darkness of *Macbeth*, however. She only teaches up to the letter scene in Act I, Scene V. She finds this portion of the play, "functions as a story all on its own" and that, "leaving the children wondering about the witches prediction and just how the Macbeths might become King and Queen" is effective on its own, as well.

And what about mathematics? Drama play and Shakespeare can also help young children prepare for the mathematics concepts they will meet in junior high and high school. In February 2016, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) released the results of a study conducted at the Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts at the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts. The study compared the effectiveness of elementary school

teachers equipped through Wolf Trap's Professional Development program (PD) versus the effectiveness of teachers that did not participate. In three separate trials, the students of the teachers in the PD program scored consistently higher in standardized mathematics tests. AIR attributes the higher math scores to a sense of balance and peace, as it was observed that, "initiative, social relations, creative representation, music, movement, and logic" were also more vibrant in the arts-integrated classrooms (Ludwig, Marklein and Song 1).

The AIR report used several movement-based lesson plans written by J. Copley "to develop skills in patterning, which is the basis for algebraic thinking and in data analysis, which builds problem solving and reasoning skills" (Ludwig, Marklein and Song 4). Patterning is a great way to introduce young children to mathematic concepts. Conveniently, Shakespeare is full of patterns. For example, it is valuable for children to be able to identify the poetic heartbeat of "ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM" that iambic pentameter provides. When children can look at a piece of Shakespearean text and find the poetry versus the prose, they are exercising pattern recognition. A more advanced exercise can have young readers scanning a piece of text and circling all the times the words "you" and "thee" are used. "You" is formal and would have characters standing far away from each other. "Thee" is an intimate word choice and a

clue from Shakespeare that two characters should be standing close together. Often, if things aren't going well between two characters, "thee" turns into "you" as conflict escalates. In opposition, two strangers may meet ("you") and find that they like each other so much that by the end of the scene, they are best of friends or hopelessly in love ("thee"). Scanning text and working out when they should be standing close together or far apart is a fun way to appeal to children's sleuthing skills and it also gives them a sense of logistics – both valuable for success in mathematics.

The AIR report also detailed success with call-and-response exercises because musical concepts, such as dynamics and tempo, "correspond to the early childhood mathematics concept of measurement" (Ludwig, Marklein and Song 5). Dynamics and tempo are two important vocal expressions for reciting Shakespeare. As luck would have it, the CCSS website lists its very first Kindergarten requirement as being able to, "Count to 100 by ones and tens". A useful Shakespearean activity can have the children tapping out famous iambic lines by Shakespeare on their chests. Not only do they get to learn some of literature's most famous lines in a musical way, but they are also learning how to group in tens: one line equals ten (beats), two lines equals twenty, and so on. Here are three examples of famous iambic lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Henry IV, Part II*

that can be used in this exercise:

"The course of true love never did run smooth."

"These words are razors to my wounded heart."

"Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."

Drama play is active, which is great for students that thrive with differentiated learning. But, in a weightier sense, the act of beating these lines on their own chests (which connects the words powerfully to their hearts) addresses the morality problem mentioned earlier. Teachers don't need to "teach" morality; rather, children can be guided with content and imagery that speaks for itself. These beautiful lines provide a touchstone, as teachers can ask, "Has anyone ever hurt your heart with words like razors? If you witnessed this happening to someone else, what would you do?" Children can tuck these lessons away in their hearts and ponder them as they mature.

#### **DRAMA PLAY AND EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL HEALTH FOR YOUNG CHILDREN**

*"Why then the world's mine oyster..." – The Merry Wives of Windsor*

At this time, New York City elementary schools do not require any emotional or social health curriculum for students. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has been lobbying to partner their program (SEL Core Competencies) with CCSS. An explanation of the SEL Core Competencies program can be found on CASEL's website and it includes five clusters: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social

Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision Making. With drama play, there is a progression in these clusters that moves from the head, to the heart, and then outward in positive action.

*The Head - Critical Thinking.* The first two clusters challenge children to reasonability: Self-Awareness and Self-Management. Drama Play supports these two emotional developments by challenging children to keep an open mind and work diligently to exhaust all possible outcomes when working through problems. Lickona implores teachers to nip apathetic attitudes and pejorative judgments in the classroom, such as calling another student a "nerd" because they are expressing enthusiasm. He states that, "work done well is a fundamental source of our dignity and sense of self-worth...when people do their jobs poorly, all of us pay the price" (Lickona 211). Universal morality is established when children uphold an agreement to work hard and respect others. Pritchard suggests that teachers "make it clear that it is the task of students to clarify and critically examine their own views and then listen and respond critically, but respectfully, to the views of others" (111). Shakespeare is full of rhetorical monologues in which characters work through their problems by reasoning out solutions. Viola's ring speech from *Twelfth Night* would work well as an example with young children because it lays out a systematic plan for solving a

problem. It also allows the children to consider different perspectives, as Viola must decide if she should reveal herself or stay in disguise as a servant boy. Learning how to think through a problem and find reasonable solutions is a life skill that comes out of drama play. Children map critical thinking patterns in their minds as they step into a character, establish a point of view, and take action.

*The Heart – Community.* The third and fourth clusters, Social Awareness and Relationship Skills, challenge children to identify with others. Lickona writes,

To develop empathy and caring, students need ongoing, firsthand experience in face-to-face helping relationships. That's how they come to bond with other people, value them, and discover the powerful rewards of touching another's life. (313)

When children are present, breathing together, and working as an ensemble of storytellers, they are being the decent, contributing members of society that we want them to be. They embrace each other as comrades-in-arms and stay accountable to each other: truly, no child left behind.

*Action – Confidence.* This covers the final cluster in SEL Core Competency: Responsible Decision Making. Armed with tools for the head and heart, children can take on the most daring and exceptional role of their lives: Hero.

When a choice in favor of what is right – to fight the dragon, to pay the debt, to tell the truth – guarantees struggle and even pain, the moment of crisis has come and the possible hero must decide. Will I act in accordance to what I know to be true, regardless of the cost? (Clarkson 60)

Pritchard points out that once children begin to think critically with moral discernment, they must be responsible to society and, “cannot remain passive” (89). This is as it should be. A better society is possible when citizens willingly examine tough issues and courageously speak out, offering cooperative solutions.

#### **A FINAL WORD: HOPE.**

*“A star danced and under that was I born.” – Much Ado About Nothing*

A rich storytelling environment can coach children into expecting hopeful outcomes in their own lives. Introducing Shakespeare’s characters to young children through drama play is a wonderful way to reinforce this positive point of view. Shakespeare’s characters are survivors and they always play to win. Even in the midst of tragedy, Shakespeare’s characters look to the promise of a new day. For example, in the final moments of *Romeo and Juliet*, when two long-feuding families rush to the scene and take in the loss of their beloved children, there is bittersweet hope as they grieve and silently agree to a new era

of peace. J.R.R. Tolkien describes the classic concept of *eucatastrophe* as "the joy of the happy ending, or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'" (qtd. in Clarkson 111). Clarkson adds her thoughts to this concept:

True hope, the kind rooted in eucatastrophe, is a muscled active energy that sets to work to bring about the beauty it has glimpsed...Hope is a trumpet call crying for us to work and walk and love our way toward the happy ending we have glimpsed from afar (115).

Truly, Shakespeare's works nourish the minds and souls of young children and give them a star under which to dance.



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