

An Evaluation Assessment of “Pop-up Puppet Theater”: A Project Aimed at Improving the Oral Presentation and Writing Skills of Third Graders

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For over three years, 6000 third graders participated in literacy workshops using puppets. This paper shares survey and standardized testing results and explores the benefits of program evaluation.

DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Developing the Idea

In 1997 a Jersey City principal asked the Educational Arts Team (EAT) to develop a project to help his fourth grade students improve their oral presentation skills for a newly revised section of the Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA). This was a standardized test required by the State of New Jersey at that time to measure language arts and math competence. Knowing that many children love to hear stories, create plays and make puppets, EAT developed a workshop series called *Pop-up Puppet Theater* (PPT).

The idea originated from observing children of that age sketch and play at their classroom desk with paper drawings to create fantasy dramas. With those playful impulses in mind, EAT anticipated that when children played with language and puppets to create their own puppet productions there would be gains in literacy. In PPT children would learn to transform storytelling into puppets, scripts and scenery in order to improve their oral presentation ability.

This paper will describe how the Educational Arts Team developed and implemented PPT into a district wide project in Jersey City for over 100 third grade classes during a three-year period of time. The paper will also share the data we gathered to evaluate the program’s effectiveness and the conclusions we made based on surveys from over 2000 children each year.

Our success from that first project led to a number of workshops at other schools. In turn, the Jersey City Superintendent of Schools contracted us in June 1999 to work with every third grade class in the district during the following school year. He believed the workshop process, though done in the third grade,

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could create a new mind set toward literacy which would carry over into the fourth grade when the students would be given standardized tests. This resulted in our doing a seven workshop series (each workshop 90 minutes) with over 100 third grade classes for three consecutive school years (1999–2000; 2000–01; 2001–02).

At this point in time, Jersey City's schools were characterized by poor academic performance. The Jersey City School District had been state-run since 1989, the first and longest running takeover of a failing system in the nation (Lindsay 2). During the year leading up to the development of this project, 1998–99, "scores of Jersey City's students on both the 8th grade readiness test and the 11th grade proficiency test continue[d] to hover around the average for the state's poorest districts. Passing rates for 11th graders on the math, reading, and writing portions of the state's test trail(ed) statewide averages by anywhere from 15 to 30 percentage points. (2)" 91% of the city's public school children were minority and 72% poor enough to be eligible for free lunches (New Jersey Urban Data.)

In September 1999 EAT began to schedule 735 Pop-up Puppet theater workshops. We hired four new leaders with drama, art, and movement backgrounds to join our five current teaching artists. We initiated a training series for the entire workshop staff to insure a uniform process and improve their capability to conduct the workshops.

We met weekly over the course of the first year to focus on goals, activities, classroom management issues and evaluation procedures. Once the workshops began, the leaders shared what they did and problems that arose. They demonstrated mime, movement, songs and games activities they were using to augment the series. They commiserated over their difficulties with some very demanding groups. Sometimes, we would view a workshop on video tape to critique each other. Other times, the staff would rehearse the stories they planned to tell the children. We also would visit each other's workshops to observe and offer suggestions. Leaders worked individually in the classroom, so the visits and the meetings also helped to build camaraderie.

While the workshop leader had the flexibility to insert their favorite songs, games and creative drama activities into the workshops, there was a basic structure to PPT:

1. The leader began the process by telling two short stories, often fables of not more than two characters, such as "Hercules and the Wagon Driver" (*Aesop's Fables* 100) and "The Boy Bathing" (222). The group reviewed the story lines. The children were then divided into pairs. One child told the first story to his/her partner; the other child the second.
2. Each child drew the characters from his/her story in pencil on two separate 3 × 3 inch white sheets of paper and retold the story to his/her partner using the drawings.
3. Next they created scenery on another 3 × 3 inch white sheet of paper using pencil and then magic markers. After finishing the scenery, the children used the markers to add color to the drawings of their characters. They cut out the characters from the paper with scissors and

then glued a black strip of $3/4 \times 7$ inch construction paper to the back of the heads of each character. The two paper puppets resembled marionettes.

4. The children "built" a simple stage by folding back approximately 4 inches on each of the sides of a 12×18 inch piece of black construction paper. The stage stood with a playing space of approximately 10 inches in the middle. The children then glued a long black strip of $3/4 \times 7$ inch construction paper to the top of the back of the scenery; the top of the strip was folded back 2 inches, so the scenery could be hung from the middle of the stage's playing space.
5. Each child in turn retold his/her story to his/her partner using the stage, puppets and scenery, and then wrote a script of the story he/she had told. He/she read the script to his/her partner and then had the opportunity to edit the script.

The leaders repeated this process three times over the course of seven workshops. In the end, each child completed three sets of puppets, scenery and scripts. Before presenting his/her play of choice to a younger child during the last workshop, each child decorated a new stage made of white posterboard, scored and printed with curtains, which, when finished, resembled a small proscenium arch theater. Each child then selected one of their three stories to perform. He/she rehearsed the story with a partner. Then the leader and teacher brought the class to a kindergarten or first grade classroom and each child presented his/her puppet show to one of the children. After returning to the classroom, the leader discussed the presentations and administered surveys.

An Opening Workshop

The following narrative is a composite report from various workshop leaders¹ of a typical first session:

I arrive 15 minutes early to a third grade class in a downtown Jersey City school. There are about twenty five children. I can see from their body language they are anxious. After the teacher introduces me, I tell them that I am both a storyteller and an artist and that over the next seven weeks we will be doing art and telling stories together. I explain that on the last day we are going to put on a puppet show for younger children. To relax the group, I lead a series of mime exercises. I see pleasure and amazement on their faces. Tension is now vanishing from the room. The class is ready for storytelling.

I explain that I am going to tell two stories and that they will need to retell one of the stories to a partner. I assure them that if they see the images in their imagination as I tell the story, they will remember them more clearly. I explain that the more intensely they watch and listen, the better I can tell the story. The whole time I am presenting the story, the class is engaged. As I work, I am assessing potential discipline problems.

Next I give them partners by asking them to stand up as I point to them one at a time, assigning them either an "A" or a "B." I ask them to remember their letter. I ask the "A's" to paint a large letter "A" using their arm and whole body as a magic invisible paintbrush and imagine colors they like. Then "B" does the same. They are smiling. They are now releasing some physical energy, while memorizing their assigned letter as a colorful image.

Normally, I tell two stories, followed by "A" telling the first to "B" and "B" the second to "A." Sometimes, in lower functioning classes I repeat both stories, moving around the room using phrases and sentences from as many children as I can involve. In bilingual classes I tell the stories in both English and Spanish. I allow the students to tell the story in either language. Children in these classes usually seem younger in spirit and behave more responsibly.

We discuss what the characters look like. The children close their eyes and visualize them. They have 2 minutes to draw 2 characters. Sometimes I will do a drawing demonstration on the board. I pass out magic markers so the children can add color to the drawings. When they are done, the partners retell their stories to each other using their cartoon-like drawings.

Next, they have a few minutes to write their story. I insist on silence and say that artists and writers need quiet for their imagination to work. Often, there are children who can barely write a sentence. Sometimes, a child throws down a pencil in frustration because he/she can not write well. In those situations I talk individually with the child and encourage him/her to write as best he/she can. Our goal is to make the writing flow effortlessly from the storytelling and the puppet making. When writing time is over, "A" and "B" have a chance to read their stories to each other.

To end on a joyful note, I lead a song dance called "Chi-Chi Wa" that I learned from a Chilean woman who worked at our summer arts camp. We dance around eyes aglow, expressing excitement for what is ahead in the coming weeks. I announce that we will make scenery and puppet stages next week. Finally, I suggest they re-tell their stories to their families. As go to the door, I receive a few hugs and leave with a smile on my face. The process has begun and the children are connecting with me and each other.

Utilization-Focused Evaluation

At the onset of the three year project,² we put in place a design that had been piloted the previous two years. I had developed this design at Seton Hall University during a course in outcomes and evaluation. The course centered on the work of Dr. Michael Patton, a very significant figure in evaluation. His "Utilization-Focused Evaluation" method is characterized by the premise that evaluations need to be designed in order to be useful to the intended users. Patton also stresses that it is essential to win the staff over to the assessment project. Fortunately, most staff members "have a genuine interest in becoming more effective" (29).

Not surprisingly, my staff was skeptical at the start. They urged that we not become involved in something that would bury us in paperwork and never be completed or used. I promised we would review the evaluation process periodically and share the results from the surveys at meetings. I pointed out how crucial it was to report PPT's effectiveness to our funding sources: the schools and local government. Additionally, I explained the results would help the staff become better facilitators and proud of the work they were accomplishing.

As surveys were completed, the administrative staff inputted the data electronically; and the workshop leaders discussed them at meetings. This reflection became a key component in the improvement of the program over time.

The pilot design examined many academic and social issues and consisted of the following tools and strategies:

- Student Surveys asked 17 questions on topics, such as speaking, reading, writing, imagination and cooperation.
- Teacher Surveys asked 7 questions related to topics, such as the value of the workshops and the appropriateness of the stories for their students.
- Case Study Forms asked teachers to analyze and compare two of the students' puppet scripts with samples of classroom writing and discuss their general progress; the workshop leader was asked to report on his/her observations of the two students' during the workshops.
- Plans to compare the language arts ESPA results of participants with those who had been tested the year before we began. (This strategy made sense, since we had contracted with the superintendent to improve ESPA test scores in language arts).

The two surveys were administered at the beginning, end of, and six weeks after the end of the series. The surveys and case studies were gathered and reviewed by the workshop leaders and discussed at staff meetings. All the statistical data was inputted into a spreadsheet by an intern from a local college to give us percentages of how many students replied yes or no to each question. The surveys were read by the workshop leaders who chose quotes that best represented the opinions of the class based on the percentage of yes and no responses. These were kept on file school by school. Then, a statistical and anecdotal report was sent to principals informing him/her of the results of his/her school. The superintendent and his staff received a compilation of all the data at the end of each school year.

There were, however, a number of problems. The staff felt inundated by the volume of paperwork. They contended it was too difficult to observe the journey of an individual child, while effectively carrying out the workshop with a group of 25 to 30 children. Administering the surveys at the end of the first workshop took too much time from the workshop process. Teachers were complaining about the time it took to fill out all the forms. The leaders found it difficult to get back to the classrooms six weeks after the completion of a series because of the sheer volume of other workshop commitments. Because the individual student and teacher surveys contained so many questions, compiling the information was

very costly. As a result, we shortened the surveys and simplified the study by eliminating the pre-tests and the six week follow-up post-tests.

The new design more clearly focused on the goals of the project. The scope of the study was narrowed down to the following three questions:

1. Did the program improve the participants speaking skills?
2. Did the program motivate the children to write?
3. Did the program increase the scores of participants' language arts standardized tests?

The revised evaluation tools consisted of surveys that could be answered by young children and busy teachers. The student's surveys asked three key questions; the teacher's four. Additionally, only the teachers would fill out case studies.

While collecting and inputting the data was still a lengthy process, it helped students reflect on the work they had done and facilitators to stay focused on the goals of the workshops. While we regretted eliminating the pre and post-tests and shortening the surveys, we had created a more practical design. The changes made the survey process more time and cost-efficient, important features for a small non-profit organization.

WHAT WE LEARNED

The Student Surveys

The data from the surveys we collected reinforced and confirmed what the workshop leaders were sharing at staff meetings. The children were enjoying the work; and their speaking and writing abilities were improving. The percentages for all three questions we asked are based on responses from over 2000 children each year.

The first survey question asked children to circle "Yes" or "No" to the following: *Thanks to the PPT Workshops, I now feel more comfortable talking in front of the class.* The responses were to reveal if the workshops had improved the participants speaking skills. The following percentages represent the children's answers during each of the three years:

After the question, we asked the students to explain their reasons for circling yes or no. The children's explanations, for why they responded yes, reveal some of their inner experiences and attitudinal changes that took place over the seven workshops. "First, I felt kind of shy, but when I practiced, I wasn't shy anymore."

Table 1. Student Responses to Question #1: *Thanks to the PPT Workshops, I now feel more comfortable talking in front of the class.*

	Yes	No
June 2000	68%	32%
June 2001	78%	22%
June 2002	83%	17%

"I talked in front of two people. I now feel more comfortable talking in front of the class." "I felt shy and embarrassed, but it turned out great. I'm glad I worked so hard to do the Puppet Show in front of the kindergartners." "When I told the story to the kindergarten, they smiled, [and] then I felt happy." "Talking in front of the class makes me proud of myself."

The role and importance of the workshop leader was substantiated: "[Workshop leader] helped me open the door to my imagination. I never had so much confidence until she came." "[Workshop leader] practiced with me until I got the hang of it, she gave [me] the courage to read to people." "I enjoyed writing the puppet stories because when [workshop leader] tells us to write the story it takes me to another world, and because we have a lot of fun adding human characteristics to things that can't talk."

For most of the participants the experience was so enjoyable they planned to share their stories beyond the classroom: "I liked [the] stories and you could take them to your family to tell them a story." "First I felt a little scared, but once I kept on doing it I got used to it. Now I do the show [for] my family and they loved it." "I like spreading my ideas and thoughts about things."

But for some of the children each year (32%, 22%, 17%), the seven workshops were not enough to overcome their discomfort of speaking in front of others. Those who circled "No" to the first question told a different emotional story: "I feel a little scared in front of people." "I was a little shy." For some, the problem was classroom relationships: "Sometimes people don't listen to me, and I feel embarrassed."

While a percentage of the children related negatively to the question, there was improvement each year. This was due to a number of factors. For one, the ongoing staff meetings clarified the purpose and structure of the program. This helped staff focus the workshops on our stated goals. We also expanded the repertoire of drama activities to include more mime and pantomime which helped the children to become more expressive and comfortable presenting in front of others. Finally, workshop leaders were instructed during the second year to explain the question more clearly. Through discussion, the staff had discovered that some of the children interpreted it to mean they now felt totally comfortable speaking in front of groups. After the first year, the staff began explaining that we wanted to know whether the students felt more comfortable speaking in front of others at the conclusion of the series than before it began.

The second survey question asked the children to respond "Yes" or "No" to the following: *I enjoyed writing the puppet stories*. From this question we hoped to learn if the workshop process motivated the children to write.

The children's responses were very positive and their explanations to why they enjoyed writing the puppet stories and scripts were varied: "I enjoyed [the writing], because we worked together." "It helped me with my reading." "I had a

Table 2. Student Responses to Question #2: *I enjoyed writing the puppet stories*.

	Yes	No
June 2000	87%	32%
June 2001	91%	9%
June 2002	92%	8%

lot of fun writing them and putting dialogue when the characters say something.” Some comments illustrated that storytelling and re-telling stimulated willingness and improved their ability to write: “I thought of so many things to write and tell.” “I love to write stories for other children to hear.” “It’s terrific and I would like to do it again.” “It [was] fun and could help me with my writing skills and I could use my imagination.” “When I grow up, I might even become a writer.”

Some responses confirmed the importance of a positive relationship between the workshop leader and the children: “[Workshop leader] gave me the spirit to read, and also the spirit to write.” For others, the replies demonstrated a transfer of skills. “I enjoyed writing the puppet stories because my grades in writing are going up.” The workshops empowered the children to tell the story and make it their own: “I enjoyed doing puppet stories because I can be the author and I can tell people the story I made [and also] tell stories that people don’t know.”

The third survey question asked the children to respond “Yes” or “No” to the question: *I enjoyed the workshops.*

Table 3. Student Responses to Question #3: *I enjoyed the workshops.*

	Yes	No
June 2000	96%	4%
June 2001	96%	4%
June 2002	96%	4%

The children’s responses to this question demonstrated that for nearly all of the children the workshops were “fun, exciting and incredible”; “so fun I could not stop working on it.” The question was also able to capture some of their inner experiences: “I had the courage to throw away my fears.” “[The workshops] made me feel like an artist.” “I enjoyed the drawing, because I think it helps me express my feelings.” Repeatedly, we received comments that showed that the children’s relationships to the teaching artists were positive: “I enjoyed the workshop, because I loved the teacher very much.” Some responses demonstrated the power of using puppets in the classroom: “Making a puppet [is] like making a friend;” others that the spirit of inquiry had been ignited in the classroom: “[The workshops] helped me learn something that I do not know;” “Making stuff is inventing and [the workshops] made it more creative.”

Teacher Surveys

The teachers also responded very positively to the workshops. They were welcoming and supportive of the teaching artists. While there were a few instances of complaints which arose from scheduling conflicts or a workshop leader being late, nonetheless, during each of the three years, 100% of the teachers responded positively to all four questions we asked them. Their responses confirmed and elaborated what we had learned from the children.

The first question we asked the teachers was if the workshops were valuable for the students and why. Some illustrated the personal and social growth of the children: “Students who are normally shy are now out of their seats to join in! After the last performance they all left brave and confident!” “It allowed them to

work in cooperative groups which will help them to get along better." Others revealed that the workshops were of benefit to a wide spectrum of children. "Every child has shown improvement." "This experience was a very positive one for my students. This plan bridged the gap across the needs of my students."

The second question we asked was if the workshop leader was effective. [Workshop leader] had lots of patience with my group." "The children really were learning. The students in room #204 eagerly anticipated Thursday mornings with [workshop leader]." "[Workshop leader] was very positive, supportive, creative and exuberant."

The third question we asked was if the workshops provided opportunities that motivated the children to write. The teachers were very clear that this was happening in their classrooms. "[The children] loved the stories and were eager to write them. Writing and comprehension was improved." "I saw them develop writing fluency as well as work cooperatively." Some comments also show that teachers believed there was transfer to other subjects. "The children have taken their enjoyment of writing over into other content areas. They have begun to write longer and more detailed stories." "It fostered independent thinking and problem solving as well as encouraging each student as a writer."

The fourth question asked if the children were more comfortable doing oral presentations. "The workshops provided the children with a wonderful forum to practice oral speaking. Even many of the more reluctant speakers were eager to have a turn." "They felt shy at the beginning, but were thrilled when they finally performed for an audience." "I saw how my shy, soft-spoken children were actively participating and telling stories." The workshops were also valuable for those who did not speak English as a first language. "Her limited English skills have greatly improved."

Teacher Feedback to the Case Studies

During the first year of the evaluation study, we asked teachers to complete a case study on two of their students. The comments on these forms gave more details about an individual child's problems in the classroom and how the workshops were of benefit. "He is very hyperactive. This activity gave him the opportunity to channel his energy into something creative and constructive. He looked forward to performing." "He wrote a full paragraph. He was able to write very little at first." "He now takes more time in his writing. He now explains things in more detail."

The comments revealed that even those children usually withdrawn and uninvolved were drawn in by the drama process. "She usually refuses to participate when it comes to speaking in front of the class, however during PPT, she always participated." "This student, new to our school, felt uncomfortable speaking at first. I think it helped him feel more at ease with his peers."

At the conclusion of the workshops at each school, the principal received the percentages to each of the questions and the comments of their students and teachers. The superintendent and supervisors were sent a district-wide report at the end of each school year consisting of a compilation of the findings from all the schools. The data told principals and administrators a story of success and growth. Next, we awaited results from the State of NJ standardized scores and an answer to our final question: Did the program increase the scores of participants'

language arts standardized tests? In October 2002 the district published the ESPA scores from the previous three years.

At the point we began the PPT project, the percentage of children receiving a passing score on the ESPA was very low throughout the schools. In May 2000 only 34.4% of fourth graders district wide had achieved minimum competency on the tests (*ESPA Scores in Language Arts 2*). This was a key reason why the Superintendent had contracted us to work with all third grade classes in the district. When the classes we had worked with in the third grade took those same tests in the fourth grade, district-wide percentages improved to 64.4% in 2001; the following year 2002 to 71%. This represented a change of 36.6% improvement over two years. The data suggested that PPT had an effect on standardized testing in the area of language arts.

The following chart shows the test score results from all 29 elementary schools in Jersey City over three years: 2000, 2001 and 2002 (Table 4). The percentages represent the number of students who were able to pass the Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA) in Language Arts (*ESPA Scores in Language Arts 2*) at each school. The last line indicates district wide results. Column Y2000 represents the percentage of students who passed the tests that year. These fourth graders had not participated in our PPT workshops as third graders. Those who had the PPT workshops in grade 3 were tested in 2001 and 2002. Y2001 and Y2002 demonstrate the percentage of students passing ESPA tests those two years. (Please note that the final group with whom we worked in the third grade was tested in May of 2003 with a different standardized test making comparisons difficult. At this point the district has not yet published the results of that test.) The last column represents the percentage of change in ESPA results between Y2000 and Y2002.

FINDINGS SUGGESTED BY THE STUDY

Every school, in which PPT workshops were done, recorded substantial improvement in ESPA language arts scores. Can drama activities have such an effect? Wagner makes a strong case for the correlation between drama and literacy by citing the following six studies:

Conner (1974) found a significant positive relationship between role-playing activities and general cognition in reading, language, and mathematics. Rice (1971) found that a systematic program in creative dramatics appears to be effective in providing for basic readiness for reading in kindergarten. Pellegrini (1980) found among kindergartners a significant relationship between drama, which included story reconstruction, and reading achievement. Pellegrini and Galda (1982) found that adult directed thematic fantasy play is significantly more effective than spontaneous dramatic play or drawing a scene from the story in promoting recall of literal details, understanding, and analyzing questions than either discussion or drawing for kindergarten and first graders, but not second graders. Galda (1982) found that those kindergartners through second graders who dramatized a story had better story recall and comprehension than those who engaged in discussion or drawing. Galda (1984) also found that, for second graders, dramatizing a story seems to result in greater understanding of

Table 4. Percentage of Students Passing the Elementary School Proficiency Assessment in Language Arts

	Y2000	Y2001	Y2002	% of Change from Y00 to Y02
P.S. #3	43.6	82.1	75.6	32.0
P.S. #5	50.0	86.5	85.5	35.5
P.S. #6	43.1	67.7	94.8	51.7
P.S. #8	31.3	58.2	60.2	28.9
P.S. #9	53.3	70.8	75.6	22.3
P.S. #11	40.3	78.1	85.2	44.9
P.S. #12	24.4	49.0	50.9	26.5
P.S. #14	22.2	29.8	43.6	21.4
P.S. #15	12.5	26.1	38.7	26.2
P.S. #16	48.5	79.4	97.0	48.5
P.S. #17	32.5	64.2	78.5	46.3
P.S. #20	36.2	64.2	77.8	41.6
P.S. #22	23.9	44.1	45.9	22.0
P.S. #23	30.8	64.2	71.6	40.8
P.S. #24	36.0	59.3	70.8	34.8
P.S. #25	39.5	75.2	79.0	39.5
P.S. #27	41.5	71.3	85.4	43.9
P.S. #28	45.7	71.3	69.1	23.4
P.S. #29	10.9	38.9	66.0	55.1
P.S. #30	18.2	63.2	67.8	41.6
P.S. #33	77.3	81.3	93.7	16.4
P.S. #34	24.6	35.8	48.0	23.4
P.S. #37	61.0	84.8	96.6	35.6
P.S. #38	28.3	68.0	65.6	37.3
P.S. #39	6.7	22.9	61.8	55.1
P.S. #41	19.3	32.9	51.5	32.2
P.S. #42	65.6	71.9	96.8	31.2
District	34.4	60.4	71.0	36.6

cause and effect and the motivation and emotional responses of the characters (106–107).

A key question we need to ask is the following: Could the drama and art work that we did with the children in the third grade transfer to the testing the following year? “Transfer refers to learning in one situation and context that produces capabilities and dispositions or inclination producing effective performance in a different situation and context” (Catterall 61). This was, in fact, what the superintendent had in mind when he contracted the EAT. He believed that our PPT drama workshops would create a positive mind set toward literacy learning that would carry over into the fourth grade.

Many studies have examined the issue of transfer between drama work and literacy. Baker noted that one of the surprising results of a study by Podlozny was that “enacting a text makes a new text more comprehensible . . . a demonstration of the power of drama to develop text comprehension skills that transfer to new material” (qtd. in Baker 47). DuPont found that fifth-grade remedial reading students’ com-

prehension skills, as measured by standardized and criterion referenced tests, are enhanced through a reading program that utilizes the strategy of creative drama (41).

The elementary school principals whom I surveyed believed PPT played a major part in the Jersey City School district's efforts. They remarked that we were the only intervention program for third graders for the two previous years prior to the improved test scores. It should also be noted that while the district focused on improving literacy those two school years, eighth grade standardized test scores in language arts (GEPA) decreased 9.2%. This is in sharp contrast to the 36.6% increase in the scores for fourth graders over the same period of time.

There is a strong suggestion of a causal link between the PPT program and the increase in standardized test scores in language arts. This belief is reinforced by the accumulation of positive survey responses and anecdotal remarks from both students and teachers over the three years. That a process combining storytelling, drama, puppet making, writing, and art, created a very successful educational experience for a large number of students seems evident. I would suggest that the PPT process closely parallels the reading and writing experience, but is more accessible for children functioning poorly in school. The process makes concrete what is expected of a good reader—the transformation of written words into images. Wagner makes this point clear: "Dramatic play and drawing are ways of saying this stands for that, Vygotsky sees both as a precursor to writing. Both are symbolic acts" (24). In PPT a child is drawn into a story world of mental images and given the opportunity to share that world with others in a number of enjoyable ways. The child listens to a story and transforms his/her images into art (the puppets and scenery), new verbal forms (his/her retelling), and written expression (script). The children then re-work their story and combine the oral, written, and visual into a final product, their performance.

"Puppetry," writes Landy, "can be seen as a total dramatic art experience, since it involves design and construction, movement and speech, play writing and improvisation, performing and viewing" (225). The PPT process gave each child the opportunity to be fully engaged in a total production as director, designer, puppeteer, and script writer. With the support of the workshop leader each child created, directed, and presented his/her own puppet show. At the heart of that process was hearing, remembering and responding to stories. Galda explains that "exposing children to narrative in many forms . . . facilitates children's developing narrative competence" (108). She proposes that the "linguistic transformation of roles and props and peer interaction are the elements of play that enable children to sequentially recall stories" (112), an ability crucial to improving language arts competence.

PPT also provided the opportunity for the development of oral language. Educational drama and workshops like PPT are rich in adult/child and child/child dialogue. Pellegrini's research cites Bruner, Blount and Vygotsky: "young children learn language by interacting with adults in dialogue" (58). One teacher noted: "Students created stories in written language after [workshop leader] provided [verbal] background." Another teacher observed the excitement that the process created when children shared their work with others: "The [students] really looked forward to going to the K-104 class to share the stories they wrote."

Writing is a key indicator of academic success in all subjects. PPT was designed to create a dramatic process so engaging to children that writing would flow effortlessly. In PPT children transformed story images into drawings of characters, which in turn were used for dramatic action. This art work, in addi-

tion to puppet movement, created a smooth transition to writing. For children whose writing skills were at a very low level, as in Jersey City, the support from art into writing was important and may be the reason for the positive responses of the children to the writing of the puppet plays. Additionally, the PPT project allowed students to use their own language to retell, dramatize and write their stories and scripts. Many educators have discovered that when children are able to write from their own vocabulary they will write more freely and with less resistance (Armstrong 87). As a Jersey City teacher noted about one of her students, "She has begun to write longer stories in language arts. She also has learned to use figurative language as well as illustrations to explore her stories."

Numerous studies link the power of drama and art to improved writing at all levels of school and provide evidence for their value as pre-writing activities (Catterall 52). Collins found that the association between writing and drawing to be particularly strong among younger children. He points to Dyson who concluded from her observations of kindergarten writers that early writing includes illustrations made meaningful through talk (202). Moore and Caldwell concluded that "drama and drawing were more effective than traditional language arts discussion as planning activities for writing for second and third graders" (108). "Roubicek found that acting out a story is significantly more effective than a structured discussion for improving subsequent writing among fifth graders" (Wagner 144).

Listening to and telling stories are clearly valuable experiences: children discover story patterns, build new vocabulary, and have an opportunity to re-use good sentence structure. Stories establish powerful bonds between the teller and listener. All children should have the opportunity to become thoroughly grounded in stories, songs and wordplay as a foundation for reading and writing. These forms tap directly into the powerful faculty of our imagination evolving into new patterns which in turn can be expressed in various ways.

During the history of the human species our verbal and physical communication has evolved from the sounds and gestures of earlier primates. Those ways of communicating predated the use of picture or written symbol systems. Every child proceeds similarly: moving from touch and listening to gesture and speaking to doodling and drawing and finally to reading and writing. As educators, we can use this natural progression and utilize these steps, retracing them as needed, to help children comfortably and confidently build toward more complex communication skills. The theater and art activities in our workshops provided children opportunities to safely fail as they developed and rehearsed their stories and joyously succeed as they gained in competence through practice and performance. Thus, self-esteem and academic achievement became linked together in a spiral of success.

NOTES

¹ Roxanna Arrojo, Dominick Buccafusco, Rosette Capotorto, Ellen Cerniglia, Kelly Darr, Nicole Hebert, Erzulie Mendoza, Anastasia Royce, Alyssa Weinstein were PPT workshop leaders at various points of the three year project.

² The research in this article, that contains "human subjects," meets the guidelines specified in the Ethical Standards for the Reporting and Publishing of Scientific Information. After reviewing the APA Publication Manual, 5th edition, Appendix C, and applying the relevant regulations to my work, I am confident our research conforms to the

aforementioned standards. The research collected for this article was obtained through a personal evaluation completed by students and teachers who participated in our workshops. The quotes contained within the article are reflections of the participants' experiences. The information was collected under the conditions that the participants, i.e., students and teachers, remain anonymous; there are no "personal identifiers" in the article. The data collected over the course of the research was relevant only to the purposes of the study. There were no attempts to mislead the participants while gathering the information and they were given the opportunity to continue with or withdraw from the evaluation process at anytime. And finally, there are no attempts to create data or provide false results in this article.

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