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POLSKY, SCHINDEL, TABONE. 2006. DRAMA ACTIVITIES FOR K-6 STUDENTS: CREATING CLASSROOM SPIRIT. MARYLAND: ROWAN & LITTLEFIELD EDUCATION

Sarah Adams

When I chose to go into urban education several years ago, one of my goals as an educator was to find ways to incorporate issues of social justice and my vision of peace into my practice. One way to implement these values is through conversation and drama. In *Dramatic Activities for K-6 Students: Creating Classroom Spirit*, authors Polsky, Shindel, and Tabone find a way to attain these goals through drama activity. The authors believe that through dramatic play students will develop the skills to peacefully communicate as means to resolve conflict, rather than resorting to violence. While I feel that the authors did a fairly adequate job of addressing issues such as violence, theft or discrimination through building understanding and community; I question whether the activities accommodate for the challenges faced in many urban classrooms.

Creating a Classroom Spirit is a book was written as a tool for classroom teachers to assist students in their development of social skills. The book gives a wide range of activities- broken down by upper and lower grade levels- that allow students to use dramatics arts as a means for learning how to work together. The reader is given tools to teach students not only the importance of social values such as cooperation and listening, but also how to put them into practice. The book format is clear and easy to follow. *Dramatic Activities for K-6 Students* is divided into five sections, each with a different focus: *Getting started*, *Caring and Sharing*, *Conflict and Consequences*, *Bullying and Teasing*, and *Envisioning Peace*. Each section begins with a background on the chapter's topic explaining how it helps develop a sense of classroom spirit.

The introductory chapter gives a framework and helpful hints on how to use the book to the best of your advantage. Since the book pertains to having students act out various characters and creatures, the *Getting Started* section gives the reader background information on making such activities successful. This first chapter also provides the reader with a support foundation from which to begin facilitating drama activities in the classroom. For example, the chapter offers activities to help students become more expressive and practice working in groups. In addition, this introductory section shows the reader how to assess student participation. The chapter concludes with expectations for the facilitator which serves as framework for effective implementation.

The remaining sections of the book are divided into themes that all contribute to the creation of a peaceful classroom environment. Each chapter follows a similar format beginning with an introduction of the chapter's topic followed by stories that are attached with instructions for reenactment. The *goals* and *materials* needed to implement the activity immediately follow the story. Next, the authors present a *warm-up* section that helps to get the students thinking about the goal as a theme of the activity as well as get warmed up for activity. The warm-ups usually consist of a conversation about a topic question and some type of stretch or pantomime exercise. Immediately follows the *development* section that provides the reader with the actual steps for telling the story and facilitating its reenactment with students. Then, the authors close the activity with a *wrap-up* section that helps guide students toward the message or moral of the lesson. To conclude, there is a section entitled *enrichments and extensions* that shows the reader how to build on the lesson through other art forms such as crafts or drawing.

As a teacher, I found the format to be a very clear and helpful framework to read. It was easy to read and follow, and it was particularly helpful in planning lessons. In addition, having no experience in teaching drama, the warm-up and group building activities helped me to think about how to introduce this type of teaching to my classroom. The authors provide useful background information, good stories to reenact, and helpful hints to focus students in on the overarching theme of the activity. The separately-themed sections allowed me to immediately target areas that were more of a challenge in my own classroom (for example, bullying as opposed to sharing). I especially liked how there were guidelines for extending activities to different subject areas or even different art media; these guidelines could help tap into the strengths of other students, allowing all students to contribute in the end.

Overall, I enjoyed reading the book and appreciated the goals of the book. As a first year teacher, I must develop goals for my own classroom and ideas about my responsibilities and an urban educator. I am currently teaching in an urban classroom at a Title I school located in south Philadelphia, populated by 95% African American students. Although I have only 19 students – which is a dream in this district- my instructional practices are data-driven and shaped by the core curriculum pacing guide

adopted by the school district, leaving little time for much else. Due to these constraints on the time I have with my students, it is a challenge to find time to address my core values for teaching. One of the values for my classroom is to have a safe environment where students feel that they have the ability and opportunity to take risks, ask questions, and be themselves in order to make the most out of their learning. In addition, my students happen to be a dramatic bunch. When I came across this book, I was excited to learn that there were teachers among the community of educators who are thinking of creative ways to implement personal values that I share in the classroom.

I especially enjoyed the section on “Bullying and Teasing” because the authors focus on empathy, trust, and compassion. When I first began teaching, there was a lot of bickering that was taking place in the classroom that was taking up instructional time. One of my challenges was to find a way to build community and a shared understanding of respect as well as care in the classroom. This chapter touches upon these issues with classic stories such as the *Billy Goats Gruff* and Leo Lionni’s, *Swimmy*. These activities open up conversations about feeling excluded and accepting difference, which are values I would like my students to internalize.

The other section that was of particular interest to me is “Conflict and Consequence.” It became apparent to me early on that my students were more inclined to choose aggression over verbal communication to resolve conflicts. As a result, I was drawn to this particular section of the book. I planned to teach one of the lessons regarding fights among friends. As a precursor to the lesson, I introduced the concept of the “I” statement, which can be utilized as a non-threatening tool to discuss feelings invoked by conflict or disagreement. The students seemed to be interested in the topic; however, when it came time to divide into groups for reenactment, students began to argue over whose group there were to participate. From this experience, I came to realize that although the book appears to present all the information needed by the facilitator, it was difficult for me to predict what problems would arise. One challenge I faced with implementation planning how much time to spend on each section of the lesson. In the book, it gives reference to “blocks” of time; however, there was no clarification as to how much time should be spent on each activity. In addition, when teaching and introducing the activities, the time it took to actually execute them turned out to be much longer than what the book made it seem.

This book is filled with wonderful ideas and activities that can serve to be great for building community in the classroom; yet I feel that the authors may not have taken into account some of the contexts and limitations of teaching in an urban school, for example: strict time limitations, prior knowledge of concepts/values promoted in the book, classroom size or lack of instructional assistance. For urban teachers who plan to implement activities from this book, I suggest thinking about issues specific to their own classroom such as dynamic grouping students for activities, and assessing student prior knowledge or current understanding of peace or non-violent communication strategies. Addressing these issues might take place in the form of a structured conversation with students, followed by goals for the drama unit or a “K-W-L” chart. Time spent considering these challenges before beginning activities will assist in the success of their execution. In addition, it is important to recognize that the guidelines for implementation of the activities provided in the book will be difficult to execute if there are classroom management challenges in the classroom prior to the introduction of this teaching form.

I enjoyed reading the book and wholeheartedly agree with the values and vision of the book. Yet, as in most cases, the text did not translate exactly into what it was designed to accomplish. I am interested in acting out other stories with students to see if my outcome was an isolated experience. Making time for these activities in a standardized curriculum-dominated schedule is definitely a challenge. Nevertheless, the qualities this book attempts to inspire in children are imperative to the success of urban youth. It would be my dream to see this book included in a professional development training or workshop offered to teachers so that experienced professionals could address some of the questions on time and implementation that were not apparent in the book.

I recommend this book, but highly stress the necessity for thoughtful and meticulous planning. This will aid those teachers who are interested in equipping students with ways to handle themselves appropriately. This book is well suited to teachers who are teaching for social justice; however, it may be better suited for “overachieving” first year teachers or those with more experience or comfort with their practice, perhaps after the first or second year teaching or once systems and practice are more solid. The book could be used as one of several tools for teachers to establish classroom community, which, I believe, will inevitably result in a more productive instructional environment.

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Sarah is a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley where she studied Political Science and minored in education. During undergrad she interned at the California Department of Education (CDE), high schools in San Francisco, and a Charter School in Oakland. She went on to do consulting for the LA’s BEST (Better Educated Students of Tomorrow) After School Enrichment program in LAUSD for a year before returning to graduate school. As a graduate of the M.S.Ed. Program in Elementary Education at the University of Pennsylvania, Sarah is currently working as a 4th grade teacher in South Philadelphia with hopes of returning to graduate school to study structural inequality.

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