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Creative drama in the elementary classroom: An integrated literature review

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Creative drama in the elementary classroom: An integrated literature review

Abstract

Creative drama in the elementary classroom has often been thought of as a frill or luxury, but a new movement is underway. Drama specialists believe that their dream is finally coming true. For several years, they have hoped that educators would see the value in using creative drama in the elementary classroom. It appears that may eventually become a reality. Kase-Polisini (1987) observed that America is headed in that direction.

CREATIVE DRAMA IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM:
AN INTEGRATED LITERATURE REVIEW

A Graduate Project

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Linda Lorraine Withers

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AN INTEGRATED LITERATURE REVIEW

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the
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Creative drama in the elementary classroom has often been thought of as a frill or luxury, but a new movement is underway. Drama specialists believe that their dream is finally coming true. For several years, they have hoped that educators would see the value in using creative drama in the elementary classroom. It appears that may eventually become a reality. Kase-Polisini (1987) observed that America is headed in that direction.

During this period of massive curricular change, with educational administrators taking the initiative to include all the arts in the school curriculum, we are in a position to firmly establish theatre as a part of the public school curriculum. We know what is needed. For grades K-6, creative drama should be available to every student. (p. 15)

Drama specialists all over the country are engaged in serious dialogue regarding the further direction of creative drama in the elementary classroom. Wills (1988) observed that this is a very exciting time to be in drama education. Some states now require drama in elementary schools, and others are looking closely at the idea.

Nationwide, the arts (including music, the visual arts, and drama) are being incorporated into more of the K-12 curricula (National Endowment for the Arts, 1988). The Council of Chief State School Officers (1985) found that 43 states were revising their K-12 curricula to include the arts. Should things continue as they are, schools will see many changes over the next few years in the area of the arts and education. Kase-Polisini (1987) stated: "It is no longer a matter of

whether states will accept drama in the K-12 curriculum, but rather a question of when each state will join the national bandwagon" (p. 17).

With the movement towards integration of the arts into elementary classrooms, it will be necessary for educators to examine thoroughly the implications of this trend. The establishment of a background, analysis of current research and reports of what has already been done successfully in classrooms is needed. Also, the development of teachers' roles and their preparation for the future, as well as the consideration of changes in teacher education programs have yet to be examined as a whole.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the literature relative to the role of creative drama in the elementary classroom. Specifically, the study will investigate the following questions:

1. What is creative drama?
2. What are teachers' roles and responsibilities in the area of creative drama?
3. What will this mean for future teacher education programs?
4. What are the positive outcomes of creative drama in current elementary classrooms?
5. What approaches to drama presently exist in the elementary school?

What are the differences between these approaches?

6. What evidence do we have that supports the notion that creative drama/theatre should be a mandatory part of the curriculum for elementary children?

Significance of Study

While specialists are doing their best to create interest in creative drama, there appears to be a lack of evidence to support its inclusion in the curriculum. This study identifies and synthesizes the ideas of prominent writers about what is taking place in the area of creative drama and the outcomes that can be expected when it is used in the elementary classroom.

While several benefits of the use of drama with children can be cited, many of these, because of their nature, cannot be easily tested for effectiveness. This review attempts, therefore, to provide both a description of what is presently going on in the classroom and a look at what can realistically be expected of elementary classroom teachers. It is an appropriate way for educators who may soon be asked to integrate drama into their elementary classrooms to study the area.

What is creative drama?

According to a 1977 committee of the members of the Children's Theatre Association, creative drama is defined as "an improvisational, nonexhibitional, process-orientated form of drama where participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experiences, real or imagined" (McKerrow, 1988, p. 36). Creative drama in the classroom basically began in the early 1960's with the notion that emotions need to be educated with the same emphasis and importance as intellect (O'Hara, 19484). Specialists in the field began to think of drama as more than simply a separate discipline; instead, they thought of it as a process or a means of instruction. They realized the

value of promoting children's creative expression through the use of the various arts. According to Robinson (cited in O'Hara, 1982), "Drama in education is, then, seen as a way of teaching and learning, rather than a conventional school subject with definite knowledge to be acquired or skills to be learned" (p. 318).

When teachers use creative drama in their classrooms, they may incorporate it into many subject areas. Children may be seen portraying a growing seed, sewing flags as Betsy Ross did, or roleplaying a child being offered drugs. They may take journeys to the moon in their minds, or practice their spelling words by shaping their bodies into letters of the alphabet. Creative drama is being used as a tool for learning.

Many educators are interested in creative drama but are questioning their roles and responsibilities in the use of this type of drama in their classrooms. A closer look at the qualities needed by a teacher who leads creative drama activities may be of some benefit.

Teacher's Roles and Responsibilities

As a leader of creative drama in the classroom, the teacher must believe in what he/she is doing. Heinig (1988) believes that the teachers are the key players in the process of integration. Perhaps this is because the responsibility for the success or failure of the program lies with them. Heinig explains that teachers must be as patient with themselves as they are with children. By using drama, teachers are allowing children to gather a vast array of information in more meaningful and concrete ways.

Teachers often feel inadequate when it comes to teaching drama in their classrooms. Many have a real desire but feel it should be left to the experts. Yaffe (1989) explains:

One does not have to have drama background or experience in order to use drama well in the classroom. What one needs is a sense of adventure, a willingness to try something new, and staff development that is truly about staff development! (p. 31)

Wright (1984) cited two abilities that leaders of drama should possess. The first ability is to be able to move beyond the lessons into inventive and imaginative concepts that meet the needs of the learners. The second capability is to be able to invent and adapt readily creative ideas while leading participants. These two abilities should already be qualities of an elementary teacher.

Since classroom teachers will undoubtedly play the most important role, it is necessary to ask them about their current viewpoints and ideas regarding the integration of creative drama in the elementary schools. For this purpose, a questionnaire was administered (Stewig 1984) to 100 elementary teachers to find out what they knew about drama and how/if they used it in their classrooms. There were 17 males involved in the study and 83 females; all teachers had been in the field from one to more than seven years. In all, the teachers taught in 44 different school districts. Of these 100 teachers, only 14 had ever taken a course in creative drama. The questionnaire asked these teachers to respond to 21 items as either agree, neutral, or disagree. (See Appendix for complete summary of responses.)

Of the 100 teachers surveyed, 56 felt that there was too much prescribed curriculum to teach, thus preventing them from including drama in their classrooms. While 90% agreed that children could learn language arts skills through creative drama, only 18% felt that creative drama was a basic subject in the curriculum. There were also 75 teachers who were interested in receiving help with creative drama as part of an inservice program.

Most of the teachers supported creative drama and thought that children could learn from it, but they also felt that they would not know how to plan a sequence of drama lessons. Nevertheless, 49% stated they knew enough about drama to teach it in their classrooms. This reveals a contradiction. After studying the responses, it is clear that the neutral category may not have been used as it was intended; perhaps it was used by teachers who did not have a particular interest in the area of creative drama. Some of the questions could have been easily answered with a "yes" or a "no".

The last questionnaire item dealt with the number of times the teachers used creative drama in their classroom during the past school year. The responses varied: 12--never, 2--once a day, 6--once a week, 30--at least once a month, 5--several times a month, and 41--whenever it was appropriate. The researchers felt that the last choice, "whenever it was appropriate" should not have been included because it became a "blind" for teachers to hide behind; it was not used as an honest answer (Stewig, 1984).

Two conclusions can be drawn from this study. One is that there are no nationwide data that indicate whether or not children are experiencing informal drama on a regular basis. Another is that "though creative drama has been justified on many bases, clearly the advocates of drama have not convinced most elementary teachers" (Stewig 1984, p. 29).

What does this mean for future teacher education programs?

As the integration of creative drama moves closer to becoming a reality, teacher education programs are inevitably going to change. According to Wheetley (1988), "every theatre teacher must be able to function as educator and inquirer, observer and analyst, psychologist and counselor, philosopher and visionary. In addition, an elementary school teacher must be an effective storyteller and creative drama leader" (p. 18). But elementary classroom teachers cannot do it alone--nor can education professors at the university level. Drama training at all levels by professionals in the field is a necessity if creative drama is to succeed in the elementary classroom.

Creative drama should, in the opinion of McKerrow (1988), ideally be taught in the elementary classroom by a drama specialist. She believes, however, that it could be taught by a regular classroom teacher provided there is a change in teacher training and licensure all across the country. This would mean stricter requirements involving creative drama classes in education programs at the university level.

Kardash and Wright (1987) suggest that future research should concentrate on whether classroom teachers can be effective drama leaders

and whether years in the field can make a difference in that effectiveness. If, as Kardash and Wright (1987) suggest, creative drama has a moderate positive effect on children's performance across achievement areas, then more research is warranted.

The direction in which the area of creative drama is headed suggests that the specialists in the field have a difficult and important job ahead of them. Kase-Polisini (1987) states that there is still a lot of work to be done.

The implications for those of us in higher education are profound. We must be prepared to take the responsibility for training the many new teachers that will be required in the near future. We must work to make certain that training in creative drama is required of all elementary school teachers entering the field...Finally, we must prepare to offer inservice training to those already working in schools. (p. 17)

What are the positive outcomes of creative drama in the classroom?

If educators are expected to use creative drama in their elementary classrooms, it would seem reasonable that they should also know why they are teaching it. Specialists have attempted to demonstrate the outcomes of creative drama in the classroom and its benefits for children. According to Davis and Behm (1978):

Participation in creative drama has the potential to develop language and communication abilities, problem solving skills, and

creativity; to promote a positive self-concept, social awareness, empathy, a clarification of values and attitudes, and an understanding of the art of theatre. (p.10)

One practical reality that drama supporters must contend with is that several of these qualities are difficult to measure. This appears to be a problem when trying to convince school leaders of drama's educational worth. Much has been written about the positive benefits of creative drama over the past several years. These include rationales, teaching methods, materials, and support papers concerning the necessity of drama in the elementary classroom. However, Stewig (cited in Vitz, 1983) explained that the findings were "generally hopeful, vaguely uplifting and comforting, but not specific enough...to convince superintendents, principals, or harried teachers that creative drama is anything more than a well-intentioned frill which is eminently dispensable" (p.17).

Teachers who have an interest or background in creative drama can easily point out the many benefits that it can have on students. They may even be able to demonstrate a difference in student attitudes and performance. Yet, those who are not experienced in this area need to see the rationale for taking the time to learn creative drama methods. This responsibility for providing proof lies with the drama specialists of the nation.

There are two major difficulties with the recent studies that have dealt with drama's positive effects in the elementary classroom. The first problem is sample size, and the second is duration of treatment.

Vitz (1983) explained that drama has always been characterized as a one time event. Consequently, few research studies exist, and none of the successful ones have been duplicated. She concludes that the effects of educational drama have not been explored to the extent they could be.

In order to provide an overview of the then-recent research in the area of creative drama, Kardash and Wright (1987) conducted a meta-analysis of the literature available on the topic. They attempted to answer two main questions concerning creative drama: "1) What is the overall effect of creative drama on elementary school children? 2) What sample and study features covary significantly with effect-size estimates?" (p. 11) For purposes of this study, creative drama was operationally defined as "any drama with children that connects them with their own creative processes" (p. 11). The researchers included in their analysis only activities that were concerned with process rather than performance as the main goal.

The meta-analysis originally included 29 journal articles and 28 dissertations from 1965-1984. For various reasons, 27 of the articles were discarded. Some were editorial or theoretical articles, some had insufficient data, and others dealt with topics unrelated to elementary education. Fourteen of the 28 dissertations were also thrown out for similar reasons. The final count was two journal articles and 14 dissertations.

The study was statistically accurate and complete. It analyzed four achievement areas: reading, oral and written communication, person perception, and drama skills. The analysis revealed that creative drama

treatment, used under average conditions, moved a typical student from the 50th to the 75th percentile of the untreated population, regardless of achievement area.

The researchers did, however, find many things missing in the studies they analyzed. They noted that most of the studies failed to provide information about the procedures used to train the instructors and/or those who observed the changed behavior in students. These studies also did not establish the reliability of instruments used, and they failed to explain the methods used in reporting observed characteristics. Sample size also needed to be larger; the average size of the treatment groups was 16. The homogeneity of the sample was also criticized. The majority of the studies were done with typical students who attended public schools in rural-urban settings. The criticism lies in whether or not drama will then be effective in other situations, and with other types of students, thus looking at external validity.

The meta-analysis by Kardash and Wright (1987) suggests that further research is needed. In the nearly 20 years of research analyzed, there were only two studies that met the criteria and answered the question: "What is the overall effect of creative drama on elementary school children?"

This is not to say that there are not positive effects that creative drama could have on students. There simply has not been enough research evidence collected which supports what specialists in drama education have observed and believe to be true--that creative drama does indeed have a positive effect on students of all ages.

Teaching drama as a formal discipline has often been referred to as scripted drama. This type of drama puts its main emphasis on actually teaching students the skills to perform plays. They receive experience in looking at the technical aspects of theatre, e.g., scripts, make-up, staging, and set building. Students are also involved in the study of the classic scripts in the field of drama. Wills (1988) looks favorably upon this approach. She is an advocate of making children aware of the quality works of art. Her suggestion is to start children in the fourth grade and teach them two plays a year. Thus, by the sixth grade, these children will be able to talk about six plays with some degree of intelligence; in her opinion, this is more than most adults can do.

Rosenblatt (1984) agrees with this position. He believes that "with the proper education, the child will be in a position to grasp more of the symbols within the performance and thus derive greater meaning" (p. 11). These opinions support the direction from which drama has come historically.

Formal drama or creative drama--which approach should be used?

Teaching drama as a separate subject seems unrealistic to some elementary teachers due to the number of areas that they are already required to include in the curriculum. The question can be asked: How is it possible to add yet another subject? Wilkinson (1988) noted that because there is a resistance to teaching drama as a separate discipline in already full schedules, drama specialists need to find alternative

approaches for exposing all children to experimental drama; integration of creative drama, rather than formal drama, may be that alternative.

The National Endowment for the Arts, a group established and funded by the national government for the purpose of looking at the arts in education, has another opinion. Their 1988 report entitled Toward Civilization: A Report on Arts Education, stated that basic arts education should "include the history, critical theory, and ideas of the arts as well as creation, production and performance; and knowledge of and skills in the arts must be tested" (p. 13). This would appear to support the use of formal drama; yet most elementary educators have neither the training nor the interest to include all of these aspects into a basic drama curriculum.

Which method of instruction has greater value? Perhaps a combination of the two approaches would work. The difficulty lies, however, in knowing who should be responsible for making the decision. There is no research evidence currently available to establish the value of one approach over the other. However, practicality and opinion by educators in the field seem to point to the use of drama as "an experience rather than a subject" (Davies, 1975, p. 3).

Should creative drama be mandated in the elementary classroom?

In spite of what is lacking in the area of empirical research, as well as the lack of a consensus on which approach should be used in the classroom, it is interesting to note that as of 1985, 43 states were revising their curricula to include the arts. As of 1987, Texas was the

only state that required drama to be taught in the elementary classroom. However, Iowa is now in the process of writing a Pre K-Grade 6 curriculum guide. Many other states are also on the verge of incorporating comprehensive arts education into their curricula. These all include theatre as an art (Kase-Polisini, 1987).

Those who support mandating creative drama feel strongly that it will make a difference in the lives of children. Iowa's curriculum guide entitled "Developmental Drama: The Curriculum Process for Pre K-Grade 5" includes, as part of its philosophy statement:

Drama education may be viewed as a process of social, intellectual and creative exploration. It develops from the human need to communicate and is one of many processes by which humans learn about themselves and their world. Through the language of drama, individuals interact with each other, sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences... Drama, as an important form of communication, must be infused within the curriculum to empower children to achieve an optimum level in all areas of development. These areas are: cognitive, social/emotional, language, and physical. In addition, classroom teachers should be aware that creative drama has value in its own right. (pp.5-6)

The guide supports integration of drama for strengthening cognitive skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, literacy and socialization. It also recognizes drama as an art form.

The question must still be asked: Does research support the theory that creative drama in the elementary classroom can make a

difference in the development of these skills? All sources consulted do show cases (some isolated) of benefits that children have attained from creative drama. The research literature contains supportive statements such as the following:

...dramatic experience helps oral and written language to develop quickly, easily, and freely. (Monson, cited in Wilkinson, 1988, p. 11)

...The interactive, participating model of the drama experience helps children grow in a different way, moving them forward toward a new, collective understanding...it is, on its own, a powerful medium for helping children make learning happen. (Booth, cited in Harp, 1988, p. 939)

...Drama in the classroom means honing thinking skills, increasing comprehensions, bringing the written word to life--and fun. And it's effective with general, gifted, and at-risk students from K-12. (Yaffe, 1989, p. 30)

...Drama is a process that actively engages students in the expression, analysis, and sharing of their own feelings and perceptions, attitudes, and ideas. (O'Hara, 1984, p. 318)

Summary, Conclusions, and Suggestions for Future Research

Several important conclusions can be drawn from the review of literature concerning the use of creative drama in the elementary classroom.

As studies have shown, there is not widespread support for drama in the classroom by elementary teachers. Perhaps this is due to the

limited amount of research data currently available. One thing is known, however. If research does show that creative drama can have a positive effect on learning, then the burden of proof lies with the specialists. They have an obligation to show teachers that it is worth their time and effort to include drama experiences in their classrooms. More studies need to be done nationwide using a variety of situations, ages and ability levels. Educators at all levels will need to be trained in the use of drama in the classroom; the entire process needs to be strong and positive. Unless it is done correctly, the children will be the ones to suffer.

This type of training would also be costly. With school budgets continually being scrutinized, specialists would have to show a true commitment to the cause. There would also need to be a financial commitment at the state level. This is a definite possibility providing educators take advantage of the funding available, but according to Towards Civilization: A Report on Arts Education from the National Endowment for the Arts (1988) "there is a major gap between the stated commitment and the resources available to arts education and the actual practice of arts education in schools" (p. 7).

In looking at what research tells educators about the positive outcomes of using creative drama in the elementary classroom, there is clearly a lack of convincing evidence available. This was apparent in the meta-analysis conducted in 1987. After approximately 20 years of research (1965-1984, the years used in the meta-analysis) only two journal articles were found that fit the criteria for analyzing these

effects. The lack of dissertations available (N=14) confirms that research on the effects of drama in the classroom is also lacking at the university level.

Those educators who have worked with children and creative drama say they know how effective it can be. The impact of positive research findings may be negligible, however, if a way cannot be found to train teachers and make resources available to everyone.

There are opposing views regarding how drama should be used in the classroom. Some suggest it should be a separate discipline; others suggest using drama as an instructional tool. Both approaches have merit, but each one is built on a completely different philosophy. Those interested in teaching drama as a separate discipline are viewing drama as an art. Their wish is for children to have an appreciation for all aspects of the theatre. Those who advocate the integration of creative drama want to use it as a teaching method to facilitate cognitive and affective skills in the classroom. The essence of the debate leads to the question: How can elementary classroom teachers with absolutely no training be expected to support the idea of drama in the classroom if those people who specialize in the field cannot reach an agreement?

Granted, these are the extremes. There are those who would take a position somewhere in the middle and even attempt to integrate these two philosophies. But, that is the point. Is it not necessary to know which direction is more beneficial before mandating it in the classroom? These opposing viewpoints seem to be impeding progress toward the goal

of having drama become a part of the elementary classroom. A decision must be reached.

This raises the next issue. Is there currently research evidence available in the field for states to be requiring creative drama in the classroom? In a recent interview, Anne Federlein, co-author of Iowa's new drama curriculum guide entitled "Developmental Drama: The Curriculum Process for Pre K-Grade 6" explained that she was surprised when the state asked her to assist in writing drama curriculum; she believes there is a lack of empirical research available. She does feel, however, that the curriculum guide is a step in the right direction:

The state needs to realize that they can't simply work toward mandating drama in the elementary classroom without teacher training. Anyone who's ever worked with creative drama knows that it has an effect on learning. It is up to us to show all teachers that it does. There is a lack of research, and that's what our current study is hoping to do--to show that it works. Our curriculum guide really works.

Some may ask the question, "Isn't that backwards? Shouldn't research studies be conducted first, Observations made of the effects, and then mandates be made and curriculum guides written and implemented?" Many quantitative researchers would answer "yes" to this question. Gretta Berghammer, University of Northern Iowa associate professor, and co-author of "Developmental Drama: The Curriculum Process for Pre K-Grade 6" feels differently:

There have been many studies done in the past that supported the need for artistic education. Studies were done as far back as the '30s, '40s and '50s that showed what drama could do for children. Yet, dramatists did not have quantitative skills to test with. As we now learn about intelligence, language acquisition, etc., we can say, "Oh, yeah! We knew about that a long time ago!" In other words, we've known it works for kids, we just didn't know how to measure it. One good example is for children who are learning English as a second language. I have known for years that drama works when communicating with these children. Recent studies are pinpointing that if they can act out the language, they will learn to speak it. For example, if a child can pantomime an ice cream cone, he will more easily learn the words to say. Basically, what it comes down to is this: Dramatists are qualitative people. We have better tools than we did in the past. What we need to do now is team up with quantitative people.

So, where do we go from here? With creative drama being such a prominent topic right now, it seems the perfect time to do several things. These suggestions are made based on the review of literature.

1. Develop a means for collecting qualitative and quantitative data in the area of the arts.
2. Conduct valid studies using a variety of grade levels, methods, and locations around the country.
3. Write curricula that is most beneficial for children as supported by above study findings.

4. Begin to look at ideas for inservice programs for teachers already in the field and establish continuity across grade levels.
5. Make creative drama education part of teacher training programs at the university level.
6. Based on success of the above ideas, mandate its use in the elementary classroom.
7. Conduct longitudinal studies analyzing the effects of creative drama on elementary school children.

Whatever decisions are made concerning the future of creative drama in the elementary classroom, we must all remember that no one can do it alone and that children should be our primary focus.

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APPENDIX A

The J. W. Steinwig Questionnaire

Impediments to Teaching Drama

The J. W. Steinwig Questionnaire
Impediments to Teaching Drama

STATEMENT	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE
Most teachers are fearful about what the supervisor would think if he/she came into class when children were dramatizing.	29	16	54
There is too much prescribed curriculum to teach, which prevents me from including drama.	56	17	27
I don't do drama with my children because I don't know enough about how to do it.	33	17	27
I wouldn't know how to plan a sequence of drama lessons.	41	22	37
It takes longer to teach something through creative drama than through more conventional methods.	34	24	42
Children are apt to become overly excited and noisy during creative drama sessions.	56	17	27
There is a problem with finding space in my school to do creative drama.	43	10	27
Creative drama takes vital time away from learning more "basic" subjects.	23	25	51
My principal would support my including creative drama every week in my program.	61	18	21
Parents would support my including creative drama every week in my program.	55	30	14
Teachers don't do creative drama regularly with children because they feel principals won't like it.	26	26	47
Teachers don't do creative drama regularly with children because they feel parents won't like it.	20	27	53

Teachers don't do creative drama with children because most schools don't have enough space for such activities.	26	22	52
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Other teachers in the building I teach in don't value creative drama.	37	28	33
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There is no particular sequence to creative drama activities; the teacher simply chooses what he/she wants the children to do.	16	29	54
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Children can learn language arts skills through creative drama.	90	3	7
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There are new curriculum materials available which help a teacher use drama with children.	47	39	13
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Creative drama is a basic subject in the curriculum.	18	37	44
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Putting on a formal play (costumes, lighting, etc.) offers more benefits to children than does classroom drama.	24	26	49
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Teachers should have a course in creative drama while they are in college.	64	29	7
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As part of an inservice program, teachers should receive help with creative drama.	75	22	3
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During the past school year, I involved my children in creative drama:

12.....never	30.....at least once a month
2.....once a day	5.....several times a month
6.....once a week	41.....whenever it was appropriate