READY FOR LIFE: THEATER PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN TWO THROUGH FIVE

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Traditionally, in the United States, professional theatre experiences have been out of the realm of preschool children, especially those living in poverty. The Children's Theatre Company (CTC), Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA, has developed and is implementing an early childhood theatre initiative to strengthen underserved communities' engagement with theatre and to foster preschool children's social–emotional development, cognitive development, creative and play skills. It is this initiative, *Ready for Life*, begun in 2008, that we will present today. We will provide background to the initiative, describe the developmental process and implementation of a unique preschool critical thinking and literacy program called Early Bridges, and discuss findings from formative and process evaluations of the program.

It is an honor to be here to discuss the work of our fine colleagues at CTC. We are evaluators from the Center for Early Education and Development at the University of

Minnesota and have collaborated with CTC and artistic director Peter Brosius from the inception of *Ready for Life*. It is also a bit nerve–wracking to be here. In the spirit of full disclosure, we come to this work not as theatre experts, but as developmental psychologists and early educators with knowledge about young children and a passion for how we can creatively and appropriately apply what we know from research and best practice to support their development. The perspective of child development is one we suspect to be less commonly applied in the world of theatre, but we have found that there is an overlap where similar goals and strategies can be achieved. For example, the expression of creativity, a key developmental task during the preschool period and goal of theatre arts programming for young children, is supported through the kinds of practices that are characteristics of high-quality early childhood education and high–quality theatre education —facilitating language and communication skills, enhancing children's ability to engage in complex pretend play, and strengthening their ability to cope with challenges (such as those presented by "taboo" topics), to name a few. The team has found this integration to be exciting and energizing.

In the United States, even by early elementary school, an achievement gap in learning exists between children living in poverty and children who do not. Current early childhood practices are aimed at improving young children's school readiness and minimizing the achievement gap. CTC developed *Ready for Life* to use professional theatre

experiences as a catalyst to support young children's social–emotional, cognitive and creative development.

Ready for Life has three goals:

Foster the creation of artistic and educational programming for a preschool audience;

Provide substantive and developmentally supportive theatre experiences to children with limited access to theatre; and

Train caregivers to use theatre arts experiences to support young children's development.

CTC is fostering the creation of artistic and educational programming for a preschool audience by: working with a diverse group of artists to enrich their knowledge about child development and theatre practices for young children, inspire them to create new work, and support new play development; evaluating and revising its current theatre arts programming for preschool children to improve the developmental appropriateness and quality; and developing and implementing a preschool theatre arts curriculum called *Early Bridges* (EB) to bring developmentally appropriate theatre experiences to young children in underserved communities. It is this third activity that we will spend the rest of our time describing.

Early Bridges

EB is a preschool theatre arts curriculum that uses storytelling and creative drama to spur the creative process and help young children transform into the storytellers of their own lives. EB uses developmentally appropriate early childhood practice and includes direct collaboration with early childhood teachers, connection with classroom curriculum and goals, and empowering young children to use their own voice. Professional Teaching Artists (TA) from CTC, specially trained in early childhood and theatre practices, come to the early childhood classroom for a series of visits where TA leads children through an interactive storytelling experience and works with classroom teachers to guide children through related activities, theatre games and reflection exercises.

Interactive storytelling is a central tenet of EB. It is not a play in a typical sense, but rather an interactive experience for the children and teaching artists to create together and relies on improvisation. The teaching artist has a sketch of the story and relevant props, but the full story is not "scripted" in the traditional sense. Rather, children are encouraged to engage and interact with the characters, and make decisions about the course of the story. Reflection on the story without rote "recall questions" is a part of each story cycle.

Creative engagement is another central tenet of EB. Children and teachers are encouraged to participate in a way that makes them feel empowered and comfortable. TA empower the children to actively participate through a

variety of activities, such as making puppets, movement, songs and chants that encourage an environment of "controlled chaos". Teachers are partners in program delivery and are expected to be active participants in the EB process.

The content of the EB stories address complex themes and stereotypes —taboo topics that are not often addressed in early childhood. Exploring these themes through the art of dramatic interactive storytelling allows children to question the themes, develop their own understanding, and experience them first–hand. For example, the story of *Petronella* describes how a princess uses her bravery, kindness, and intelligence to rescue a prince from a wizard. However, at the end of the story, the wizard turns out to be kind, and the prince is not very nice, so the children address this problem by deciding what the princess should do (for example, have the princess befriend the wizard instead of the prince). This process of turning stereotypes on their head within the interactive story introduces concepts to young children to which they otherwise may not be exposed.

Similarly, the story of the *Ladyslipper*, a traditional Native North American myth, describes how a young girl is able to bring medicine to the people of her village who are sick; even a girl can be strong, gentle, and fast. In the Japanese story *Three Strong Women*, three women in the mountains teach a wrestler how to wrestle in a way that is safe, strong, and soft. This addresses the concept of aggression in a way that acknowledges both strength and softness, and encourages children to find both of these elements within

themselves without resorting to violent behavior. Currently, EB's current curriculum uses 6 such stories.

CTC engaged in a thoughtful and intentional process as the team of program coordinator, teaching artists, and developmental consultants developed EB. We conducted a formative evaluation during the piloting of the initial draft of the curriculum that included observations of the teaching artists, teachers and children and focus groups with the teaching artists. We learned that there should be a mix of activities during each storytelling session, such as an art project, a time for movement, and a time for children to tell their own stories. Additionally, the format of telling stories that had multiple parts via multiple sessions each day over the course of a week was most effective in establishing a bond between the children and the TA while building anticipation about what will happen next in the story. Most importantly, we observed solid engagement when children were cast as a character integral to the narrative.

With the initial phase of program development completed, the second phase of EB began —piloting the curriculum in early childhood settings and conducting a process evaluation. The plan was to pilot EB in four early care and education settings and ask the following questions:

1) To what extent was EB implemented according to the curriculum and with fidelity (e.g., TA implementation of lesson, teacher involvement in lesson)?

2) To what extent was EB successful in achieving outcomes related to teachers (e.g., teacher interest in incorporating storytelling into regular classroom activities)?

3) To what extent was EB successful in achieving outcomes related to students (e.g., engaging students in storytelling and creative activities)?

Four early care and education centers located in the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan region were recruited for the EB pilot; two of these sites agreed to have both treatment and control groups. We recruited sites that served a high proportion of low income children; had multiple classrooms of children similar in age and other demographic characteristics; were interested in introducing children to a theatre experience; and as part of their regular practices collected assessment data on children's development. While this evaluation is still considered a process evaluation, as the EB curriculum needs further piloting, we had the opportunity to use an experimental design to begin to explore potential impacts of EB on teachers, classrooms, and children.

The following implementation and data collection protocols were followed: four classrooms in four different sites received EB, and two of the sites also had a control classroom (no EB but an opportunity to see a play at CTC). The four treatment classrooms received 14–20 sessions of EB delivered in the form of daily sessions with TA for a

week at a time over the course of approximately 10 weeks. Implementation included TA observation of the classroom prior to EB to ensure a close mesh with the current classroom culture and climate, pre and post meetings with teachers to determine appropriate and relevant stories and the needs and interests of the children, and specific goals of the classroom, as well as conducting the story session/lesson for all sessions. Each story has an average of 3–5 sessions lasting approximately 45 minutes each, as is appropriate for young children.

This table outlines the concepts of interest, the measures we chose, and the sample size for the process evaluation. We are using a pre and post design on measures

Concepts	Measure	N Treatment (EB)	N Control (no EB)
Fidelity of implementation	EB observation	4 classrooms	n/a
Impact on classroom practices	Teacher focus group	4 teachers + assistants	n/a
Classroom quality	CLASS pre and post implementation	4 classrooms	2 classrooms
Play	Pre play (PIPPS pre and post)	60 children	35 children
Children's development (social, cognitive, emotional, language, motor)	Children's development (Works Sampling System; teacher report)	45 children	35 children

of classroom quality and children's development, conducting observations of fidelity of EB implementation, and conducting teacher focus groups post–implementation.

Currently, data collection is in process. Preliminary data from focus groups conducted with 2 teachers and their assistants who experienced EB in their classrooms indicate that the program is beneficial for both children and teachers. According to teachers, the TAs were able to keep children engaged in the stories while also incorporating the children's ideas. Teachers report that children are more interested in stories in general, and are more apt to use puppets to tell more complex stories on their own because puppets are seen as characters in stories. Teachers are also planning to incorporate more interactive storytelling into other parts of their day. Teachers also mentioned that watching the TA in action and participating themselves in the interactive storytelling made them more "dramatic" in class and more willing to incorporate children's ideas in the storytelling experiences in their classroom. A teacher said:

> We went out on a hot day and we sat in our playscape and just talked. Then [the children] wanted to tell stories. One little boy just wanted to tell the story by himself —the three little pigs. Then someone else said, "Let's just say one word to add to the story." And I know that wouldn't have happened before [EB]. We are more willing to be in that moment and not have a destination in mind.

The director of one site said:

> So often we see kids coming into this program who are too pre–occupied, that we sort of have to teach them how to play. [Our TA] was able to get them to that place in a way that was better than what we could have hoped for.

Teachers also mentioned the importance of uncovering stereotypes through stories like *Petronella* that addresses the traditional idea of princesses being rescued by princes. Teachers were enthusiastic about having a TA be engaged and active additions to their classrooms. To be able to see the artistry of actors close up rather than on a stage was an eye–opening experience and brought theatre, drama, and storytelling to life in an intimate and engaging way. Teachers mentioned that the TA's artistic ability and expressions, the encouragement for the children to act out the story, the abstract thinking involved in the experiences, and the engagement of all five senses were highlights of the experience of EB.

Conclusion

EB represents a significant undertaking based on a clear mission, goal, and commitment of CTC to address needs of preschool children, particularly in underserved communities. The EB implementation and evaluation demonstrates a thoughtful and successful process that integrates early learning and theatre theory and best

practices. The result is unique programming with non-traditional content for young children that addresses stereotypes and other topics that are not generally raised in early childhood classrooms. Through evaluation we are continuing to refine and explore the effects of EB and we will work on next steps for program development and implications for professional development for early childhood teachers.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this initiative.

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***Early Bridges* Schools:**

Cherish The Children Learning Center, Children's Home Society And Family Services, Families Together Therapeutic Preschool, Kaleidoscope Preschool, Lacreche Early Childhood Centers, Northside Child Development.