

Actively Engaging With Stories Through Drama: Portraits of Two Young Readers

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Building literary understanding through drama offers opportunities for students to use their strengths to create multilayered and rich understandings of stories.

Zach, Brett, Andrew, Tommy, and Kevin (all names are pseudonyms) are involved in a role drama based on *Tops and Bottoms* (Stevens, 1995). Most of these first graders have taken roles as members of the rabbit family and are interviewing Tommy, in the role of the lazy Bear. Bear does not want to do any of the work of planting the crops in his garden, and he is upset with the rabbit family. They plant crops for him but keep tricking him out of his harvest. As rabbits, the children ask Bear questions that explore his feelings and motivations.

Zach: Did you feel bad that we made all of the plans?

Brett: To cheat you? Were you mad at us?

Tommy: Yeah! I feel like stealing all the plants back.

Andrew: How about you ask the little bunnies to help you plant?

Tommy: I already tried. They just keep on tricking me.

Zach continues the questioning by asking Bear what he was thinking and feeling when the rabbits took his food, Brett asks why he didn't do any of the planting himself, and the group comes up with many creative ideas so that Bear will not go hungry again, such as working together with him so that they can all

get food. The boys repeat the dramatic play and take turns trying out different character roles. Through this exploration of the ideas and dilemmas in the story, they have tried on multiple character perspectives; personalized their interpretation through voice intonations, gestures, and movements; and helped one another to build and clarify the meaning of the story. Does this scenario look like the kind of literacy instruction usually provided by a reading specialist for young students in a reading support program?

How Can We Engage Young Readers?

As an elementary reading specialist, I was concerned about the growing emphasis in federal and state mandates in the United States on explicit phonics instruction for primary students who qualified for our district's Title I reading support program. Although many of my young readers had difficulties with decoding words, others could decode easily, yet they had problems connecting to the stories that they read or heard and adding their own experiences, opinions, and feelings to the discussions of literature.

My work in previous years with older readers in middle school often showed that some readers who had spent years in remedial instruction had difficulty in engaging with texts. They were reading words, but the texts held no personal or social significance for them; texts were merely something to get through. In Wilhelm's (2007) work with struggling middle school readers, he found that they tend to think of reading as a decoding process rather than an active meaning-making process. He argued that literary understanding depends on a reader's engagement with stories: both on a reader's entering and becoming involved

in a story and on using that involvement to interpret such elements as character, setting, and thematic possibilities. Enciso (1996) has stated,

Engaged readers elaborate on and connect their own experiences with the text. [They] use their knowledge of textual structures, the world, and personal experiences to construct and evaluate meaning, and embed their reading in social purposes and interactions that facilitate intertextual, interpersonal, and societal understanding. (p. 172)

I wanted to provide opportunities for young, struggling readers to be engaged with text right from the beginning of their school literacy experiences. Comprehension of stories has often been defined as encompassing the knowledge of narrative elements, such as plot, setting, and theme. This article takes a broader view of comprehension, which expands the meaning-making and communicative options available to young readers and provides a foundation for increasing engagement with texts and building literary understanding from multiple perspectives. By weaving drama into literacy activities, I found that struggling readers create and express rich understandings of text through modalities that are not usually emphasized in literacy instruction (Adomat, 2005, 2007). Kress (1997) suggested that young readers “make meaning in a plethora of ways, with an absolute plethora of means, in two, three, and four dimensions.... Different ways of making meaning involve different kinds of bodily engagement of the world” (p. xvii).

A multimodal approach to literary understanding takes into account the whole range of modes involved in meaning making, such as speech, writing, image, gesture, music, and others (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). In her study with third graders in a Title I program, Hoyt (1992) used drama and the visual arts to facilitate learning in ways that stimulated the imagination, enhanced language learning, and deepened understanding. If we acknowledge that children are active learners and that some children will want to “manipulate stories as well as math materials,” it makes sense that they will want to work with characters, events, and settings in concrete ways or to learn through multimodalities (Wolf, Carey, & Mieras, 1996, p. 130).

According to Gee (2004), learning to read and learning context can never really be separated: “Humans understand content...much better when their understanding is embodied, that is, when they

can relate that content to possible activities, decisions, talk, and dialogue.... [T]hey learn through action and talk with others” (p. 39). Drama is essentially a shared experience. When children read or listen to a story, they create personal images in their minds; in drama, they build a group image and enter into the world of story with others (Wolf, Edmiston, & Enciso, 1997). By interacting as characters through drama, children generate new meanings and possibilities for stories and come to understand stories and their implications from multiple perspectives (Adomat, 2007).

Drama in the Classroom

As a district reading specialist, I coached elementary teachers in literacy and worked with small groups of children in the primary grades, both in the regular education classroom and in supplemental pull-out groups. The district was located in a rural-suburban setting on the outskirts of a major metropolitan center in the northeastern United States. One of the elementary schools in which I worked enrolled a range of socioeconomic groups, which reflected the district’s transition from a rural farming region to a more affluent, suburban area. Ninety-six percent of the district population was white, 3% African American, and less than 1% Asian American and Hispanic. The district defined its balanced literacy framework as a language arts block devoted to reading workshop, writing workshop, and word study. Responding to literature through discussions during read-alouds, shared reading, or literature circles was encouraged and practiced throughout the elementary grades.

Ten out of 100 first graders qualified for additional reading support through their scores on a variety of screening assessments that measured decoding, comprehension, and reading level; they were in the lowest 10% of their grade level. The comprehension assessment required the children to retell stories in sequence and to include as many details about the story elements as possible. I met with the 10 first graders in two separate groups every day for one hour of either in-class support or supplemental instruction. The first group was introduced at the beginning of the article, and the second group consisted of Nathan, Dorrie, Matt, Ryan, and Natasha. I varied my instruction based on the individual needs of the students; in addition to engaging the children in a variety of reading and writing activities, I wove drama into our

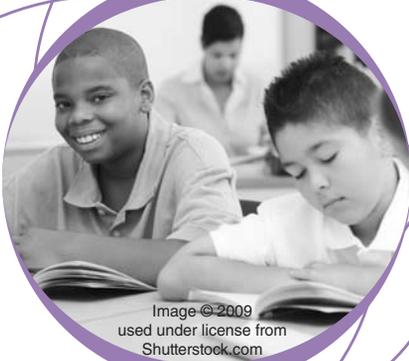


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time together approximately once a week in response to read-alouds of picture books or shared readings of big books.

Our classroom drama activities were based on process drama (O'Neill, 1995) or story drama techniques (Booth, 1994), such as role-play, hot-seating/interviewing, and tableaux.

In structuring drama activities, I used the issues, themes, characters, mood, or conflicts and tensions in the story as a springboard for dramatic exploration in whole groups, small groups, or with partners. Dramatic work was shaped both by the text as well as by the teacher and student interactions (Wolf et al., 1997). In addition to more structured drama activities, children engaged in spontaneous dramatic play (Rowe, 1998) and story dramatizations (Brown & Pleydell, 1999).

As teacher-in-role (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), I was able to nudge the children to deeper understandings by participating alongside them within the drama. Through that perspective, I gained firsthand experience of the drama and was able to adjust and expand my literacy lessons in light of the children's growing understandings of both literature and drama processes. I reflected with the children about their insights after the drama work had ended through discussions and writing, such as writing in role (Crumpler, 2003).

Over the course of the school year, I gathered data for a larger study (Adomat, 2005); audio- and videotaped the children's discussions before, during, and after drama activities; transcribed, analyzed, and coded the transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998); and arrived at categories of how children comprehended, or built literary understanding of, stories through drama. I also observed and participated with the children in their classrooms, interviewed teachers and parents, and kept extensive field notes.

This article focuses on how 2 of those 10 struggling readers were able to build rich literary understandings of and engagement with literature through drama. I chose to portray these 2 boys, who were the lowest achievers upon qualifying for reading support,

because each had strengths to build upon, and each developed rich and unique understandings of stories through drama.

Nathan

Nathan was referred for the reading support program at the beginning of first grade because he had a great deal of difficulty in kindergarten developing as an emergent reader; his kindergarten teacher reported that he had trouble learning the correspondence between letters and sounds. Nathan labored over the reading of small, three-letter words, which drained his enthusiasm for reading stories on his own. Nathan was especially frustrated when writing stories because it took him so long to form his letters, and he was unable to translate all of his ideas quickly to paper. He had already started to develop ways of avoiding reading in the classroom, such as pretending to read stories during silent reading time or "forgetting" to bring his book bag home for his nightly self-selected reading.

However, Nathan enjoyed the story dramatizations that his classroom teacher had done with the class; he had a penchant for being the center of attention and working imaginatively with stories. Nathan's teacher described him as a social leader, and he took a playful approach to discussions of literature in the classroom. He also participated in book discussions during read-aloud time in his classroom with great energy, yet his score on the test of reading comprehension at the beginning of the year was low. The test showed that Nathan had difficulty retelling the main ideas of the story in sequence.

It was clear that Nathan needed some extra help and practice with the graphophonic aspects of reading. I addressed those within the context of a variety of reading and writing activities, but he also needed to have opportunities to build on his interest in discussing stories—to sink his teeth into stories and to delve deeply into their meaning before he became too discouraged about reading. I wanted to treat Nathan as a competent meaning maker rather than as a reader who has not yet learned the skills expected for his age and grade level. Through drama, he would be able to approach texts in an imaginative way and create a personalized meaning for story before he turned into the kind of disengaged reader who focused only on reading the words (Wilhelm, 2007). As Edmiston (2007) stated, "Drama can...create spaces where children can

be viewed primarily as people using their strengths in learning literacy practices” (p. 338).

Taking the Spotlight

When I introduced drama into our small-group sessions at the beginning of the school year, Nathan was eager to participate, although he was rather more interested in getting the starring role than in being a member of the chorus. When he could not get his first choice of roles, he sometimes refused to participate in the drama, at least initially. Sometimes he would make statements like, “I’m hiding,” and then go off to a corner of the drama area and sit quietly. However, he usually wound up back in the drama after a few moments, but then he tried to slip into a different role for himself.

Nathan came up with a clever and somewhat sneaky solution for slipping into the starring role during the drama activity based on *Owen* (Henkes, 1993). Matt was in the role of Owen, who was being interviewed by the other characters from the story. Nathan had wanted to be Owen at first and was a bit silent and sulky when he did not get his wish. First Ryan was interviewed as Owen, and then Matt agreed to be in the “hot seat” (Swartz, 1995). Matt was sitting on an ottoman facing the children on the sofa as he answered his questions as Owen. I was in the role of Mrs. Tweezers, the neighbor in the story, and asked Owen, “You think your Mom and Dad are going to let you carry that blanket around?” While Matt was answering the question, Nathan quietly crept up behind him and then sat down beside him on the ottoman. He slipped into the role of Owen and stated what *he* would do to get his blanket to school: “I’m gonna sneak it. I’m gonna sneak it!” Nathan seized the role to offer his own opinions and if, like Owen, he was denied what he wanted, he was “gonna sneak” it, too.

Although it could appear that Nathan was being resistant, it was important for him to be able to enact his own intentions through drama. It was a time when Nathan could shine; he could be on center stage, and he could be funny, entertaining, and imaginative. Nathan was concerned that his ideas be adopted, and he used stories and drama to express his own personal purposes and intentions. He wanted to play with the ideas in the story, savor the language, and create his own scenarios and dialogue.

Interpreting Texts Together

As our drama work continued through the year, the first graders were able to delve more deeply into the layers of meaning in stories. In a hot-seat activity, Nathan took the role of Owen (Henkes, 1993) and was interviewed by the other children about how the little mouse felt when his mother cut his beloved blanket into handkerchief-sized pieces so that he could continue to take it to school with him.

Nathan: I thought it was bad.

Donna

(author): Why did you think it was bad?

Nathan: Because I wanted to make a bigger handkerchief so I could do bigger stuff with it.

Ryan: Let me show you [reaching for the book].

Nathan: [pointing at page that showed what Owen did with his larger blanket before it was cut] He would swing it like that.

Ryan: Here. Right here. It’s big and he can drag his toys. It’s not in little pieces.

In this example, Nathan and his friends were learning to move beyond the literal meaning of the story to explore its consequences and implications. They were able to reflect on the actions and motivations of the character in the story by taking turns in the role of Owen after Nathan had started the drama. Through these kinds of discussions around drama, the children were able to extend their understanding beyond the literal meaning of the story as they “folded in [their] own experiences and those of [their] fellow readers, interpreting text together (Wolf, 2004, p. 94).

Playing With Stories and Imagining Possibilities

The most notable way in which Nathan participated in drama was in his creative, playful approaches to stories. He enjoyed playing with the language of the story. During a discussion before the drama for *Thunder Cake* (Polacco, 1990), Nathan played with the rhythm of a phrase: “I’m scared of the dark, dark, dark.” As he said it, his voice grew quieter and spookier by the third repetition of “dark.” He made a cheerleader chant out of the word *Jigaree* and repeated it emphatically several times: “Jig-a-ree! Jig-a-ree! Jig-a-ree” (Cowley, 1998b). During the drama for *Corduroy*

(Freeman, 1968), Nathan took a teddy bear and said: “I’m going to name you Brownie.” Then he started singing to the tune of “Rock-a-bye Baby”: “Rock-a-bye bear on the treetops.”

After Nathan became more comfortable with exploring textual elements through drama, he began to enjoy playing with the story in informal, spontaneous ways. After the structured drama activities around read-alouds and the shared reading of big books, he often asked if the children could “act out the story,” and sometimes I allowed the children time for dramatic play. After the role drama for *Alexander and the Wind-up Mouse* (Lionni, 1969) was over, Nathan and Ryan asked if they could play for a few minutes. Nathan became the purple pebble lying on the ground. He took the bean bag chair and covered himself with it. Ryan was the wizard and they went under the table to pretend that they were in the dark night. Then Nathan was Alexander speaking to the wizard. They both quickly moved a couple of chairs in front of the table and pretended that it was the lizard’s house, where Alexander had gotten his wish to turn his wind-up friend into a real mouse friend.

Nathan became facile at moving into an imaginary world and taking the story in a new direction. During the drama activity for *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Kellogg, 1991), Natasha had asked how Jack could get his cow back.

Nathan: I’m the wizard, and I have the magic. I can get it back! Whoosh! [He elaborately mimed how a big animal materialized out of thin air.] Could we play that again?

Within the world of imagination, magicians could appear and offer magical solutions to problems. Nathan’s dramatic play became a creative mixture of story and personal elements. In such cases, dramatic play—which is similar to the improvisational mode of more structured drama activities—focuses on creating personal interpretations and extensions of the story as well as opportunities for solving problems and dilemmas from books and the real world (Rowe, 1998).

Through drama, Nathan liked to play and replay with ideas; he improvised and offered variations on a theme, and then wanted to try it again from another angle. Like a magician pulling rabbits out of his hat, Nathan made creative variations materialize out of thin air. The unique contribution of using drama to build literary understanding is not only in the way it

can help children to learn new knowledge, but in its power to enable them to understand more deeply and transform what they already know (Bolton, 1980). In creating an imaginary world of “what if,” Nathan and the other children were able to replay their experiences and bring about change in their understandings of them (Courtney, 1990). Through drama, children are able to imagine possibilities for themselves and for stories and to transform what they know.

Drama provided Nathan with a way of building rich literary understandings that drew on and extended his textual knowledge of stories, which was in great contrast to his struggles to read small books and to write one or two sentences. Drama helped Nathan to realize that all literacy experiences would not be difficult and excruciatingly slow; literacy’s broader meaning and practices enfolded his strengths and interests and connected him in multifaceted ways to meaning making and the expression of that meaning. He was immersed in narrative meaning through an alternative mode of expression, and that kept his interest in stories alive and growing.

Tommy

Tommy was new to Grove Elementary School (a pseudonym) in September of first grade. His family had a history of frequent moves, and every year since preschool, Tommy had started at a new school. Initial screening in September showed Tommy to be an emergent reader. He knew most of the letter names, but he was unable to read a book independently. His scores on the comprehension assessment showed that Tommy had difficulty remembering the events in stories that were read aloud to him. However, Tommy enjoyed looking at pictures in books, and right from the beginning of the year he told stories and made up elaborate narratives based on the pictures. Similar to all the children in the first-grade groups, Tommy showed strengths and interests that could be fostered during language arts instruction to provide him with a broad foundation for comprehending stories.

Embodying Characters

As Tommy became more comfortable working in role, he developed a real acting prowess. He was able to sustain a role and easily slipped into dialects, voices,



and gestures that were appropriate for the characters. He gave a few unforgettable performances, such as Bear in *Tops and Bottoms* (Stevens, 1995). Taking his cue from the illustrations in the book, he pulled over a chair and slouched onto it. With half-closed eyelids, he perfected a down-home, half-asleep grizzly bear voice and sustained it for over 10 minutes while the other characters, who also adopted his drawling “bear dialect,” interviewed him. According to Wilson (2003), performative gestures used in drama “show ideas, knowledge, and interpretation” of text and are both a “mode of expression and a thinking action” (p. 377). By creating dialogues, gestures, and vocal intonations for many characters over the course of the year, Tommy was able to understand more deeply and to extend what he already knew about stories.

Personal Agency

Drama not only helps children to understand story elements and structure more deeply through multiple character roles over time, but also it allows for a personalized interpretation of text. Tommy’s dramatic responses to texts also served his own personal wants and needs, which I have termed “personal agency” (Adomat, 2005, 2007). Tommy readily admitted that he *loved* to eat, especially fruit and vegetables. Whenever there was a reference to food in a read-aloud or big book, Tommy inevitably negotiated with the other characters for something to eat. During the read-aloud of *Tops and Bottoms* (Stevens, 1995), Tommy slipped into the role of a bunny.

Donna: What do you see on the endpapers?

Zach: Fruit! Fruit! Carrots!

Tommy: Give me a carrot! [Mimes grabbing a carrot from the book]

Brett: It’s fruit?

Tommy: Vegetables. I took a carrot ‘cause I *love* carrots. [After a short pause] Could you throw me all the carrots in the book?

In this case, Tommy injected himself into the story to get what he wanted for his character. He interacted with the story as if he were actually a part of it—as one of the bunnies—and got one of *his* favorite foods,

carrots. In personalizing responses, Tommy was more able to enter into the imaginary world. Tommy found room for himself in the story and manipulated it as a way of making his needs known and enacting his intentions, even though imaginary carrots were ultimately not as satisfying as real ones.

Creative Extensions

Tommy’s creative suggestions for ways of interacting with the stories in a particular role created new perspectives on understanding for him and the others in the group. It was Tommy’s idea to be in role as a character while we were reading a big book, a technique we repeated often after that. As we read the big book, children adopted the role of one of the characters and interacted with the book as that character. Reading the book while in role gave the children an insider’s perspective on the story.

Tommy used other drama and storytelling techniques that extended the process drama activities that the children used as a whole group. For example, he created a “storytelling bag,” which was a collection of cut-out characters from the pictures he drew while writing in role. Tommy got the idea after he had written a story about *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock* (Kimmel, 1988). He asked if he could cut out the pictures of the spider, elephant, and bush deer that he had drawn. After cutting out the pictures, he started to retell the story, using the pictures like stick puppets. Over time, Tommy collected other pictures from stories he had written. He kept all his pictures in a bag, and eventually all the characters and scenery from the stories became mixed together.

When Tommy told stories from his storytelling bag, the stories he created became amalgamations of the many stories he had read, heard, or enacted through drama. He enjoyed performing these stories for the other children in the group, and they eventually developed their own storytelling bags. As Tommy became more facile with story and drama structures, he built on and experimented with creative forms of making narrative meaning. Kress (1997) discussed how certain forms of teaching can open up imaginative possibilities, in which children move freely across modes of learning, and can offer “an enormous potential enrichment, cognitively, conceptually, aesthetically, and affectively” (p. 29).



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Social Meaning Making

When we started drama during our small-group instruction, Tommy liked to take the starring role, but

Tommy used the craft of drama as a way of entering into stories deeply to explore meaning, often in playful ways, or of extending the drama to include other creative endeavors.

as time went on, he often asked for supporting roles so that his friends, particularly Zach, could play alongside him. He even incorporated his favorite stuffed animals into the drama and gave them roles. When Tommy was Bear in the *Tops and Bottoms* (Stevens, 1995) drama, he asked me about the stuffed dog that he had brought to class with him: “Can I be Bear? Me and my dog?” They were ready to start the interview:

Donna: Hello, Mr. Bear. Are you wide awake? Are you awake enough that we can ask you some questions now?

Tommy: [yawning widely] I think so. And my partner [the stuffed dog] will help me with them.

Tommy was adept at social interactions and easily brought people along with him; he was able to steer the drama in meaningful ways. Tommy’s directions to other students helped to move the action along. He told other children where they needed to go, what they needed to do, or even fed them their lines. One example occurred during the drama for *The Day Jimmy’s Boa Ate the Wash* (Noble, 1980), which was based on creating an imaginary scene after the story ended. The children were determined to bring the snake back to the farm, and Tommy helped solve the problem by jumping into a narrator’s role.

Zach: The pig came home to tell you the snake is in the wash at the farm.

Brett: The snake is in the wash? How did that happen?

Tommy: He crawled up to the bag and he started to eat. And then the baby said, “Get out.”

Kevin: [in a baby’s voice] And he found his bag, and the boa constrictor was in his bag. And the boa constrictor came out and it came back onto the farm.

Tommy used storytelling to advance the plot of the story. Remembering an illustration from the book that showed the girl coming home with her bag, he inferred that the snake was inside of it. Tommy suggested an entrance line for Kevin, which Kevin immediately jumped on to continue the narrative in his baby voice.

Another example of Tommy’s directing prowess occurred when he was in the role of the giant during a shared reading of *The Hungry Giant* (Cowley, 1998a). He was leading up to the climax in the story when the giant has a temper tantrum because the townspeople are not bringing him food fast enough.

Tommy: Get me some honey or I’ll hit you with my bommy-knocker! [Aside to the townspeople] But make it long so I can go crazy.

Zach: [to the others] Make it long.

Tommy: [play-screeching and waving his hands in the air] Get me some honey or I’ll hit you with my bommy-knocker!

Tommy was able to give quick directions to his fellow actors, even right in the middle of his most dramatic acting moment. In an aside to the townspeople, which Zach reinforced, Tommy directed them to take a long time running around looking for honey, so he could have his moment in the spotlight. Adept as an actor, too, Tommy could milk his role for all it was worth.

Tommy used the craft of drama as a way of entering into stories deeply to explore meaning, often in playful ways, or of extending the drama to include other creative endeavors. Drama also connected him to the social fabric of the group. He was fully immersed in the drama, in its developing action. Because of his awareness of social interactions, he was able to help the group sustain the drama activity and delve more deeply into the meaning of the story for a prolonged period of time. Through this network of social interactions and with a particular sensitivity for how to involve his peers, Tommy helped to create the space and structure within which literary understanding could be forged.

Discussion

These portraits of Nathan and Tommy show the different ways that drama was important in opening up their engagement with and understanding of

literature. Their stories highlight how complex and multilayered it is to “understand” a story as well as the many possibilities stories hold for children. In building literary understanding of texts, Nathan and Tommy were able to understand the textual elements of stories through character roles, to create personalized interpretations of literature by incorporating their own interests and strengths with the drama work, and to develop social contexts for meaning making. They developed engagement with stories, learned through embodied, multimodal instructional contexts, and went beyond a literal understanding of texts. As their understandings gained in richness and complexity, they were able to transform textual elements of the story as well as create new drama techniques.

Building literary understanding through drama offered opportunities for students to use their strengths to create multilayered and rich understandings of stories—analyzing, developing, and transforming textual elements through taking multiple character roles, being active agents of creating meaning by bringing their own interests, wants, and needs into the process, and expanding their perspectives through the social negotiations and multiple viewpoints that were expressed in the drama work.

At the end of the year, both Nathan and Tommy tested out of the reading support program, as did seven of the other children in the group. Through drama techniques, the children were able to use and develop comprehension strategies inductively and to take on the kinds of understandings that more proficient readers use. This study also raises the question of whether assessment measures capture the complexity of thinking that lays the foundation for understanding or the multiple ways in which children can create meaning around texts. Do comprehension measures really take into account all the ways in which children build meaning from stories, or are we making instructional decisions for struggling readers on the basis of too narrow a spectrum of reading skills?

In helping struggling readers, we might consider the importance of individual processes in creating meaning that reflect themes and issues of personal significance that develop through the interactions of children working socially in groups. Drama provided Nathan and Tommy with the kinds of prolonged engagement with texts that are usually denied to young, struggling readers, and they were able to develop

rich and complex understandings on many levels. As Sipe (2008) stated,

We need multiple perspectives on literacy teaching... that recognize the ways in which children may playfully interact with literature while at the same time contributing to their literacy learning, high-level cognitive abilities, and engagement with the imaginary world of stories so that they may develop more nuanced perspectives on real life. (p. 7)

This article points to the importance of providing struggling readers with a broader, rather than narrower, approach to literary understanding. Within rich literacy contexts and through artistic activities, such as drama, all children are able to enact the language arts curriculum in powerful ways.

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