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Early Years Educators at Play

A Research-based Early Childhood Professional Development Program

Every culture has developed some version of performance art. Children especially appreciate performance; their innate openness, forgiveness, and self-love make them delightful performers and audience members. Every time they engage with performance art, children are learning about storytelling, history, sociability, artistry, and physicality. Through performance, children learn skills related to organization, collaboration, emotional competence, compassion, and literacy. Children learn best when their lessons include rich, multi-faceted and participatory elements; drama and theater can help augment learning by involving physical movement and child participation to aid in comprehension and memory. In this article, the authors discuss a professional development program designed to support teachers in employing drama strategies for literacy instruction with 3- to 5-year-old children.

By Sultan Kilinc, Michael F. Kelley, Jenny Millinger, and Korbi Adams

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Teachers' professional expertise is critical for providing rich learning experiences for young children (Anderson et al., 2003; Barnett, 2003; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004). Thus, enhancing teachers' knowledge, skills, and practices through high-quality professional development (PD) programs is an effective way to enhance education outcomes for children (Perry, Dockett, & Harley, 2007; Zaslow et al., 2010).

Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche (2009) discussed the research about and essential criteria for PD programs that appear to have the greatest effect on teachers' practices. They identified two ultimate goals of ECE PD programs: 1) to enrich teachers' knowledge, skills, dispositions, and practices in particular curricular areas in order to expand learning opportunities for children, and 2) to engender self-sustaining professional growth and system change by providing high-quality PD practices through effective job-embedded experiences. Thus, an effective ECE PD program is designed with clear structural and process features that support teachers' efforts to be more thoughtful and skillful in their work with young children, their parents, and other professionals. Common forms of PD programs are: 1) specialized, on-the-job in-service training; 2) coaching interactions; and 3) communities of practice (COPs) (Sheridan et al., 2009, p. 381).

Specialized, on-the-job in-service training mostly focuses on various activities, such as workshops, online lectures, and tutorials, to augment teachers' knowledge and attitudes. However, it usually happens in a brief, uni-directional manner that constrains reciprocal interactions among practitioners and the "experts" leading the training (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Sheridan et al., 2009), thus limiting continued professional growth once the in-service training is over. Research indicates that knowledge acquisition and demonstrations, coupled with practicing new skills in real work settings over time with immediate feedback significantly impact teachers' learning and application of targeted skills in their classrooms (Joyce & Showers, 2002; National Institute for Excellence in Teaching [NIET], 2012; Sheridan et al., 2009).

Coaching is another PD strategy for enhancing knowledge and skills. Coaches are typically "expert" practitioners who can provide immediate feedback in trustworthy and safe environments (Rush, Shelden, & Hanft, 2003). Although research indicates the effectiveness of coaching in PD

programs, the language of coaching often creates unequal power dynamics among teachers (novices) and coaches (experts), which may undermine strong insider roles of teachers within their classroom contexts.

COPs are grounded in sociocultural theory arguing that learning and development occur in the processes of social interactions among participants in cultural practices, which are mediated by cultural tools—material and ideal (i.e., language and signs) (Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 1998). Specifically, COPs are groups of people who gather together under the umbrella of similar professional interests and goals in order to develop knowledge, practices, or understandings by collaboratively sharing knowledge, expertise, and visions (Wenger, 1998).

Within the COP framework, Rogoff's (1995) notions of three planes of development—apprenticeship, guided participation, and participatory appropriation—are useful constructs to consider when designing ECE PD programs.

In an *apprenticeship* model, individuals who have various levels of expertise and experience participate in specific activities together (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995, 2003; Wenger, 1998). An apprenticeship model is not a simplistic structure in which experts pass knowledge to novices; rather, it posits a complex set of reciprocal interpersonal relationships in which "apprentices become more responsible participants" (Rogoff, 1995, p. 143) in order to accomplish shared goals. Designing ECE PD programs as apprenticeship processes also requires sustained duration (NIET, 2012) in order to activate teachers' agency through roles and responsibilities empowerment.

Guided participation refers to interpersonal engagement among apprentices and experts in the processes of communication and coordination under a shared endeavor (Rogoff, 1995, 2003),

Authors' Note: This article highlights research-based best practices for designing early childhood education (ECE) professional development (PD) programs, and then links those practices to a classroom-embedded PD program, called Early Years Educators at Play (EYEPlay). EYEPlay is a program of Childsplay, funded through a grant from Helios Education Foundation (www.helios.org) and supported by research from Arizona State University. The EYEPlay PD program prepares preschool teachers to effectively incorporate drama strategies into their literacy practices with 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children.

which encourages teachers' own meaning-making concerning the targeted outcomes of the PD program. Guided participation within PD programs acknowledges teachers' expertise about their children, families, and contexts, and specifically inspires their roles in the process.

Participatory appropriation refers to transforming the roles and responsibilities of apprentices through guided participation. It is not a traditional notion of internalization, yet it is related to how apprentices make sense of practice through their own engagement in previous activities and meaningfully appropriate their learning into later situations in their unique contexts (Rogoff, 1995, 2003). Teachers can appropriate new knowledge and skills through guided, embodied activities in their real-work settings in COPs, which is one of the fundamental goals of an effective ECE PD program (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Olson & Clark, 2009; Sheridan et al., 2009; Wenger, 1998).

In the next section, we describe the EYEPlay PD program and highlight its unique structural and process features.

THE EYEPLAY PD PROGRAM

EYEPlay is a yearlong, early childhood PD program that pairs professional theater teaching artists (TAs) with preschool teachers in low-income settings to integrate drama into literacy practices within real classroom contexts. The use of drama in teaching is effective in meeting myriad key learning objectives related to language and literacy, symbolic thinking, problem solving, and promoting confidence and self-expression for various groups of children, including English language learners (ELLs) and children with disabilities in self-contained classrooms (Brown & Pleydell, 1999; Mages, 2008; Podlozny, 2000; Szecsi, 2008).

The EYEPlay PD program has two broad objectives. First, it aims to develop teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions about using drama strategies (pantomime, character development, group story building) as tools in literacy practices to enhance young children's literacy and language development. The second objective is to develop and maintain self-sustaining personal and professional growth by the teachers, such that they continue to employ the drama strategies in their teaching when TAs are no longer available. Thus, the program is structurally designed as COPs, employing a classroom-embedded apprenticeship model that uses guided participation processes to prepare teachers to appropriate drama strategies for literacy contexts.

Currently, the EYEPlay PD program has impacted 32 preschool teachers, who used the drama strategies extensively in literacy learning with over five hundred 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old children from diverse backgrounds, including ELLs and children with disabilities, in a large urban metropolitan area in the greater Phoenix, Arizona, area. All of the 32 preschool classrooms are located in low socioeconomic status urban settings, with roughly one-half linked to public schools and the other half to either community-based programs or Head Start classrooms.

DRAMA FRAMES

The EYEPlay curriculum is based upon three drama frames. A drama frame refers to the explicit pairing of a specific drama strategy (pantomime, character development, group storybuilding) and a curricular objective (vocabulary development, speaking and communicating, and story comprehension) that is carefully detailed in a series of literature-based documents. The first drama frame pairs pantomime with vocabulary development, the second pairs character development with speaking and communicating, and the third pairs group storybuilding with story comprehension and solving problems. The drama frames are sequential and scaffold each other to enhance literacy practices and child learning. For example, pantomime supports the development of key story vocabulary by building semantic connections through embodied cognition. This foundation supports character development, in which students speak and communicate from the emotional and physical perspective of an assumed character. Both of these drama frames serve as critical infrastructure for successful group storybuilding that requires in-depth narration, understanding of characters' emotions, problem-solving, and using the body and voice effectively—all key elements of story comprehension.

THE STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF EYEPLAY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Creating COPs through an apprenticeship model forms the basis of EYEPlay PD. It is a yearlong guided participation process approach, designed to transform teachers' identities from apprentices to accomplished professionals implementing drama strategies in real work settings.

During the guided participation process, each teacher is engaged with a TA, who is an expert in developing and implementing drama strategies within literacy contexts for various age groups. All of the TAs are specifically trained for this program

and many hold a master’s degree in fine arts or are currently enrolled in a master’s program. Their expertise in integrating drama strategies into literacy provides high-quality learning experiences for teachers. Throughout the year, each TA pairs with one or more teachers to scaffold their growth in knowledge and action in drama and literacy using apprenticeship processes. A unique aspect of the EYEPlay program is its focus on empowering each participant’s expertise to benefit from the process, in a shared reciprocal manner. In this model, the TAs are drama experts who understand embodied learning, while the teachers are experts in ECE with specific knowledge of their children, the curricula, and classroom contexts.

Research on situationally embodied curricula and learning (Barab et al., 2007) suggests that children who experience a storyline involving rich literature and drama-infused settings requiring intense, active immersion in a narrative context of use, “live” the concepts (vocabulary) and ideas (how to recall the story or propose solutions to a problem in the story) that are the primary targets of learning. An in-depth meta-analysis of the research on drama use and its impact on child literacy outcomes has confirmed the importance of situationally embodied learning inherent in classroom drama experiences. In 2000, Podlozny reviewed 80 empirical studies on the use of classroom drama and found robust evidence that drama facilitates story recall, story understanding, and oral language

development, particularly in young children. More recently, Mages (2008) conducted a more refined meta-analysis of 34 empirical studies and noted that the bulk of the research findings were supportive of situationally embodied learning, with variations noted due to the type of drama intervention used, the age of the children, amount of story exposure, and the training and expertise of the drama facilitators. The key features identified in the Mages analysis were carefully considered in the development of the EYEPlay model, including the enactment of story-based improvisation with preschool classroom teachers over the course of one year with highly trained TAs.

Intrapersonal relationships between TAs and teachers are taken into consideration during the pairing process. Personal characteristics (i.e., introvert or extrovert) and school settings of the teachers are particularly important for matching. Research suggests that consciously made pairing processes increase collaborative work toward shared goals. It creates COPs, in which members can share, discuss, and participate in activities in a democratic environment (Sheridan et al., 2009).

In the next section, we describe key EYEPlay PD components and processes that unfold during the year for each TA and teacher.

ARC OF LEARNING

The Arc of Learning (see Figure 1) represents the scaffolded learning process model of the EYEPlay

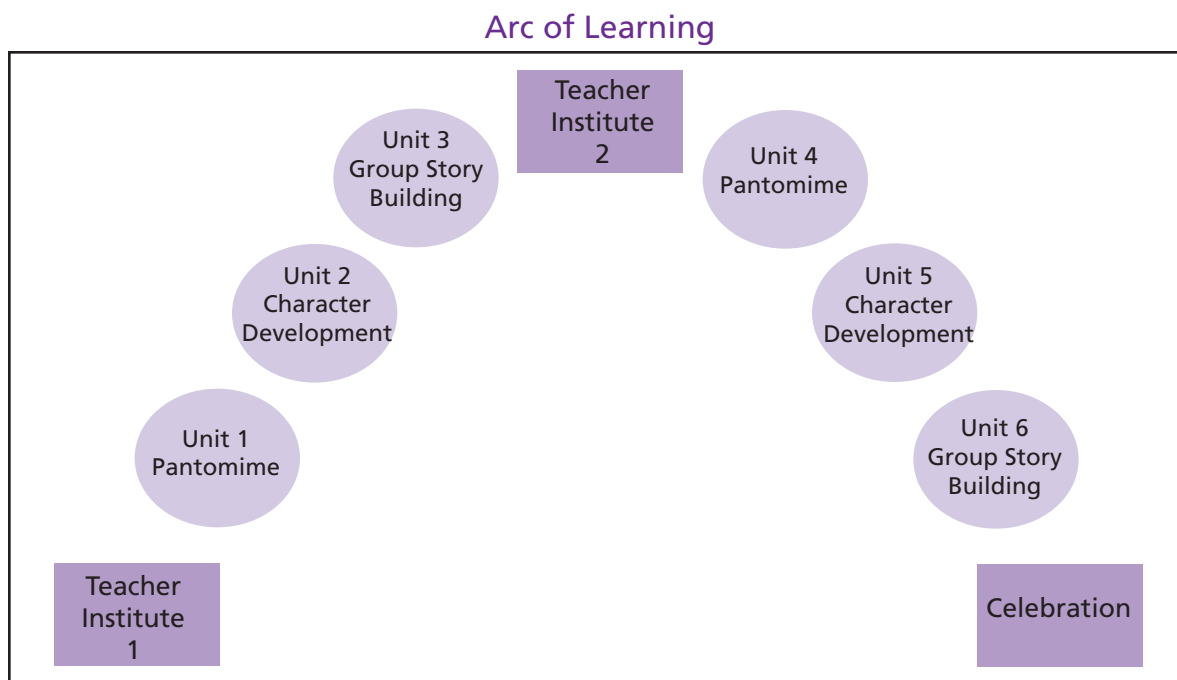


Figure 1

PD program. It is designed to advance three drama frames during the fall and again in the spring. The TA and teacher focus on one drama frame in a unit of learning, which is completed in a month. The fall cycle repeats in the spring to offer chances for the teacher to more deeply think about and implement the drama strategies that align with her own individual goals, learning trajectories, and children’s needs and abilities.

The goal of the fall semester is to guide the teacher in building foundational knowledge and skills about drama; specifically to develop her comfort with and ability to use pantomime, develop characters, and employ children’s ongoing suggestions to solve problems within group storybuilding. The spring semester allows the teacher to use and advance the skills she has developed over the fall during a repetition of the three units (e.g., refining her facilitation, encouraging children’s responses via open-ended questioning). At the end of the first semester cycle, the TA creates individualized learning plans (ILPs) for his/her teacher to customize experiences and deepen drama skills in the spring.

Teacher Institutes

The EYEPlay PD program begins with a Teacher Institute (TI), in which all teachers, TAs, program administrators, and researchers meet together at the beginning of the first cycle. The TI is conducted over a three-day period for a total of 9 hours. Each day is designed for a different purpose. Day one addresses relationship building, provides background information about the program, and allows the researchers to collect program and participant data.

Day two addresses knowledge and skill building with a focus on literacy constructs (e.g., print awareness, phonological awareness, vocabulary development, narrative skills/story comprehension) and drama frames with a specific focus on how to connect effective drama strategies to achieve specific literacy outcomes. In the drama frames component of the TI, the teachers participate in a full lesson, conducted by the TAs, that demonstrates the embodied learning features of the lesson.

Day three introduces the observation rubric comprising 13 behaviorally anchored elements for

The Unit Plan Cycle

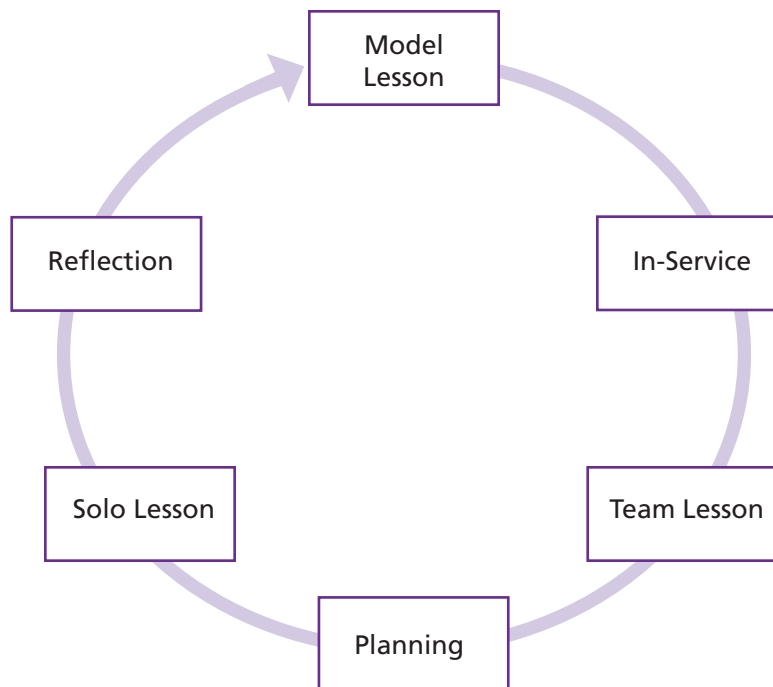


Figure 2

an effective drama lesson, specifically designed by Childsplay for this program. The observation rubric describes key features of high-quality drama instruction and serves as a process tool to guide discussion about the implementation of drama skills in literacy and as a research tool to measure ECE teacher performance over the year.

Multiple Phase Unit Plans

Throughout the year, each teacher engages with six unit plans that specifically focus on one primary drama strategy per unit (pantomime, character development, group story building). Each unit plan provides opportunities for literature-based lesson implementation with children, embodied learning, observations, and reflections. Each unit plan and its contents are customized to fit the existing curricula of the classroom. For example, a number of the classrooms employed weekly or monthly themes, such as the jungle or farming; therefore, the literature selected for the specific drama frame was purposefully linked to the classroom theme in order to support the curricular focus. The teacher develops her knowledge and skills during a six-phase process of: 1) being a participant observer in an initial model lesson that is delivered by a TA with the children, 2) participating in an in-service training as part of a community of learners, 3) implementing a team lesson that is co-taught, 4) engaging in a private planning session with the TA, 5) leading a solo lesson taught exclusively by the teacher with the TA observing the lesson, and 6) participating in a private reflection session with the TA. The purpose of this unit cycle is to intentionally transform the teacher's knowledge and skills over time, facilitating the transformation from an apprentice to an accomplished teacher who can develop and implement rich, drama-infused lesson plans. The unit plan cycle (see Figure 2) repeats six times over the year, three times each in fall and spring.

Model Lesson. Model lessons are designed and implemented by TAs in order to demonstrate an effective drama frame. Each TA selects an age-appropriate children's book to document and develops rich learning experiences consistent with the classroom literacy curricula. Drama expands traditional book-reading activity into an interactive and dynamic system of acting and problem solving, as students actively participate with both mind and body (i.e., embodied cognition). During the demonstration process, the teacher carefully observes and notes specific key lesson features taught by the TA that are highlighted on "focus cards" related to the unit's drama frame components.

In-Service Training. The in-service training is conducted in small groups of teachers and their TAs, recognizing the power of shared learning to be found through COPs. The structure of the in-service is divided into four parts: debriefing (5-15 minutes), experiencing the lesson (30 minutes), introducing strategies (60 minutes), and refining the team lesson (15 minutes).

Debriefing is a time for everybody in the COP to reflect and then discuss where they are in the program in terms of success and challenges. This safe space allows everybody to share their stories and hear about others' experiences. It focuses on a discussion of the model lesson that the teachers observed during the week. The teachers discuss the entire experience, including the drama strategies used by the TAs, how the lesson unfolded, and how the children's engagement in the drama enhanced their literacy learning.

Experiencing the lesson provides the teachers with an opportunity to experience the unit's team lesson as students through role playing.

Introducing strategies focuses on the drama and literacy outcomes detailed in that unit's specific drama frame. TAs introduce new terms and concepts and lead activities that focus on practicing facilitation of the drama strategies (e.g., vocabulary, side coaching, teacher in role, narration).

The final portion of the in-service training is spent *refining the team lesson*. Each TA distributes the drama frame lesson plan, which is discussed and further developed with his/her teacher. Additionally, decisions are made about the co-teaching roles that each will engage in with the children. The timing and location of the in-service trainings proved to be somewhat of a challenge for some of the classroom teachers. Several had to travel some distance to attend the in-services and a few of the meetings had to be held on weekends. As these challenges became known, the TAs began to adjust the location and timing of the in-service trainings to better meet the individual and group needs. The location of the in-service trainings was rotated and the classroom teachers' preference to hold the training after their workday rather than on a weekend was respected. Thus, the PD program began to customize logistical issues to better meet the individual needs of the teachers within the COPs.

Team Lesson. The team lesson is a joint implementation of the drama frame by the TA and teacher. It provides opportunities for the teacher to practice drama strategies observed in the model lesson and experienced during the in-service

training. The co-teaching approach creates a safe space where the teacher feels comfortable and supported during the process. After the conclusion of the team lesson, the TA and teacher reflect upon the lesson and their successes and challenges with the children. The co-teaching process reflected in the team lesson builds the teacher's confidence and ability to design and deliver a solo lesson.

Solo Lesson. Prior to the solo lesson implementation, the TA and teacher choose the most effective book for engaging children with the drama frame components and then jointly plan the solo lesson. The teacher teaches the lesson with the children while the TA observes. They take notes and evaluate the overall activity in order to prepare for the post-lesson reflection process.

Reflection. The reflection period is designed for discussion and reflection about the solo lesson in order to enhance the teacher's skills. Before discussion, the teacher and the TA complete self-reflection forms that characterize the teacher's success and comfort level in teaching the lesson. These forms, coupled with notes from the observation rubric, serve as discussion prompts for an active dialogue to highlight successes and discuss strategies for overcoming challenges. The processes of reflection and discussion become fundamental strategies for TAs in supporting the teachers on their journey to becoming accomplished drama frame teachers. However, the reflection process proved to be a challenge for the team, as the classroom teachers were not accustomed to being reflective about their practices. Thus, the TAs modeled deeper levels of reflection during their model and team lessons and worked with the classroom teachers to lengthen and deepen the reflection sessions through the use of inquiry-based prompts and questions.

END-OF-YEAR CELEBRATION OF LEARNING: EVIDENCE OF EYEPLAY PD EFFECTIVENESS

At the conclusion of the yearlong program, the teachers, TAs, program administrators, and university researchers attend a two-hour celebration of learning (see Figure 1). Post-test data are collected, stories and lessons learned are shared during a meal, and each teacher receives a collection of EYEPlay program lesson plans and children's books.

The EYEPlay PD program implementation and data collection ended on May 2015. During the first full year of implementation, significant amounts of data were collected, scored, and analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the EYEPlay PD program on teacher outcomes. We were most interested in any increases in

teachers' core knowledge, improvements in their sense of efficacy, enhancements in their overall performance in the delivery of the drama frames, and changes in their levels of comfort and success. Independent child level outcome data for the participating and matched control classrooms are currently being gathered and analyzed.

Year one results indicated statistically significant increases in the ECE teachers' knowledge of early literacy standards, drama frame strategies, and best practices in early literacy instruction as measured by a 36-item pre- and post-test of knowledge.

Regarding the teachers' sense of efficacy, we employed the 24-item pre- and post-test Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Results showed increases in the teachers' impact on student engagement (SE-subscale), instructional strategies (IS-subscale), and classroom management (CM-subscale), with the most significant gains made on the teachers' sense of efficacy in impacting their instructional strategies.

Concerning performance skills in delivering drama-infused solo lessons with young children, the teachers were observed delivering six solo lessons over the year (two pantomime, two character development, and two group story building) and comparative analyses demonstrated modest growth in performance skills as assessed by TAs and independent observers (IOs) using the observation rubric. IOs were assigned to roughly one-half of the solo lessons taught and interrater agreement scores between the TAs and IOs averaged 90%, indicating a high level of score consensus. The pantomime drama frame displayed the most growth, followed by character development and group story building.

Finally, we examined the teachers' perceived comfort and success in applying the drama frame lessons using quantitative rating scales, qualitative reflection forms, and focus group interviews. Over the course of the year, the teachers' ratings of their comfort and success showed modest increases from lesson #1 to lesson #6. Independent ratings provided by the teachers' paired TAs also displayed similar patterns. An analysis of eight hours of focus group interviews with the teachers revealed that they reported being very comfortable and successful using pantomime and character development drama frames, and reported slightly less comfort and success with the more difficult group story building strategy. All of the teachers interviewed reported that the yearlong EYEPlay program was the single most transformative professional development

experience they had ever undertaken. As one teacher stated,

I have never been around so many positive people who are just there to help you to become a better teacher. I love this program and I love the TA that we work with. I can't go back to how I taught before.

CONCLUSION

The EYEPlay PD program employs a sociocultural framework to enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions about integrating drama strategies in literacy and maintain self-sustaining personal and professional growth through COPs. Guided-participation, grounded in situationally embodied apprenticeship processes, is an effective method for teachers to appropriate their learning and understandings about drama in their classroom context. Yearlong mixed-method data revealed that the teachers advanced their knowledge and skills, self-efficacy, comfort, and success in implementing drama frames in their classrooms. Finally, they reported high levels of skill and confidence in using the drama strategies when no longer supported by their TA, confirming the effectiveness and sustainability of this early childhood PD program.

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