

## **SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS – LESLIEVILLE PRC PARTNERSHIP**

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### Reciprocity

Our partnership with the PRC has been a mutually beneficial relationship. This project has allowed us to engage new communities, to learn more about a specific community and an underserved demographic in theatre, and to deepen our understanding of this group with regard to the work we do in education and participation, as well as our professional programming and, specifically, play development. We have discerned the variety of ways in which our work with the PRC has been of benefit to this community, with a particular focus on developing literacy skills and English-language learning, strengthening communication, and cultivating and recognizing multiple intelligences. This partnership has been a meaningful engagement with both short and long term benefits to all parties.

### Research Limitations

This research has focused specifically on the PRC in Leslieville from September through April. While it's possible that many of these findings would be applicable or transferable to other, similar communities, the PRC in Leslieville is a unique community and our research there has been conducted over a relatively short period of time. Also, due to time and funding constraints of the PRC with which we have been working, as well as the fact that we are unable to communicate directly with the caregivers in their language of facility, we were unable to conduct interviews with any of them. Instead, we have learned through non-verbal communication, observation and the translation of staff members what the caregivers' perceptions have been. These limitations are reflected in the research findings and point to the need for further research.

## **Emergent Literacy and Dramatic Play**

### Dramatic Play as an Emergent Literacy Program

Our work with the PRC in Leslieville aligns with emergent literacy practices and contributes to the language-learning that happens in this community in a variety of ways. The drama education programming that we do with this group of learners can be defined as an emergent literacy program, in that it recognizes and includes participants as socially competent partners, allows them to experiment and learn through exploration, provides a variety of adult and peer-mediated multimodal literacy experiences, and creates a number of opportunities for teaching and learning. Drama allows for multiple outcomes to be achieved at once.

### The Value of Process to Literacy Development

Though drama work is not always process-oriented, with regard to the programming we have done at PRC, it has been focused on process, rather than product. That is, the participants have not been working toward building a show or creating a theatrical production as an endpoint. Instead, the focus of each session and of this residency as a whole has been centred on dramatic play. This process-oriented focus seems to have been a valuable approach, particularly with regard to multimodal literacy development and building narrative understanding, especially. This approach also supports the importance of context in emergent literacy practices. A focus on context is embedded within the philosophy of emergent literacy and is relevant to how language skills are both developed and applied. Our drama education programming aligns strongly with this. In comparison to some other literacy development techniques, drama work is less structured, more exploratory, experiential and holistic.

## **The Importance of Dramatic Play to Literacy Development**

### Narrative Understanding

Dramatic play focuses on and sets the stage for interpretation. Drama, as a discipline, is unique in the ways in which it offers its participants the opportunity to model and mimic. While the drama work we have done with this community has not focused on script-creation, it has provided a multitude of opportunities for listening to, interpreting, retelling and re-enacting stories. This helps to develop an understanding of story schemas and story events, which increases narrative understanding. These narrative skills are a precondition to the ability to create original stories.

### Multimodality

Dramatic play also relies on symbolic representations to be created, communicated and recognized. The ability to communicate in this way requires the development of a variety of social skills, including the ability to listen, reflect and manage multiple perspectives at once. Metalinguistic skills are given particular attention in drama education. Drama, as we have enacted it at PRC, supports multimodality or the application of multiple meaning systems, including visual art, movement, play and oral language. Physicalization, which is a strong pillar of drama work, allows for the materialization of knowledge into and by way of application. In line with practices of emergent literacy, these communication and literacy skills are transferable to other contexts and social situations.

## Oral Language Skill Development and Social Context

The drama work we have done with PRC has privileged oral language development, as this is developmentally appropriate for this group of learners. Oral language skill development is a precursor to written language skills. As opposed to more conventional ways of language-learning, emergent literacy practices centre on the fact that literacy is fundamentally social. Drama, an inherently social art form, then, is the perfect vehicle for teaching language and communication skills in this way.

### **Perceived Successes and Benefits**

Through a research approach which has included observation and interviews, we have recognized and discovered a number of benefits to all parties. It is important to note that as this is preliminary research, these are the perceived successes and benefits of the facilitators, participants and researchers involved with the program and provide a foundation from which future research can develop.

#### Language Development

With regard to both children and caregivers in the program, there has been a lot of growth in terms of English language skill-development. Over time, many of the participants have become more responsive and more eager and willing to interact and take part. Their understanding and ability to apply English language skills has increased. The PRC has been supportive of and encouraged by our approach to literacy development, not simply as language acquisition, but inclusive of communication skills more holistically. They have recognized that it is their

engagement with drama that has taught these children how to express themselves and communicate their thoughts and feelings using language and other methods of communication.

### Multimodal Learning

Drama affords multimodal learning. That is, engagement and comprehension is heightened when visual aids, gesture, physicalization, etc. are employed, because the participants are able to recognize and respond in nonverbal ways. This also helps them to track their own learning and development. Music is another element incorporated into our drama work with the PRC that is effective, as the songs we sing lend themselves to repetition and recognition. At the same time, using these songs is something that the staff members at the PRC can do themselves, so it has taken some time to discover exactly what kinds of songs are uniquely theatrical and what their effect on language learning is. Our teachers and the PRC staff members have noticed that songs which incorporate specific actions and routines directly engage both children and caregivers alike.

### Pedagogy and Curriculum

Among the staff and caregivers at PRC, it has been expressed time and time again that our teachers are great. Specifically, they have valued the energy, kindness and skill of these Artist-Educators in terms of teaching drama, in particular. They have explained that our drama education programming provides their participants with learning opportunities that would not otherwise be provided at or by the PRC. Pedagogically, there is a disconnect in terms of how our Artist-Educators teach and how the staff at PRC teach. With regard to literacy development, in particular, it has been noted that these two roles are somewhat contradictory. The PRC staff

tends to take on a more directive role, while our Artist-Educators tend to adopt a more facilitative teaching role. While research into literacy and emergent literacy, specifically, shows that adult mediation is valuable to literacy development and actually helps to increase the participation of young learners, we have noticed that it is mediation, rather than direction which is of benefit. The more directive approach of the PRC staff makes it difficult for our Artist-Educators to facilitate and to enact scaffolding and other teaching strategies as they should be implemented.

At the same time, the value of adult mediation in this particular environment has had a positive effect on the participation of caregivers in the program. The familiarity the adult learners have with the staff at PRC and, more importantly, the shared language (Cantonese and Mandarin) allows the PRC staff to encourage caregivers in a way that our Artist-Educators may not be able to alone. The increased caregiver participation bolsters the children's participation and, at the same time, it is their children's engagement that enhances the caregivers' interest and desire to take part. Caregivers, as a result of their experience in this program, have increased awareness of the arts and are inspired by how their children are affected by engaging in drama. This has also provided them with arts-based learning techniques which they can take and use elsewhere. In terms of the design of each drama session, our Artist-Educators carefully plan these workshops with a focus on literacy development. Each session is built thematically around a particular story, so the learners are given the opportunity to revisit themes, ideas, vocabulary and images in a variety of different ways, which fosters learning and allows for multimodal literacy development.

## Emotional Intelligence

The drama education curriculum we provide focuses on the social and cultural practice of literacy, rather than its academic focus. This aligns with what is privileged at PRC. In particular, we have learned that, in addition to the ways in which we foster literacy development, what our programming provides uniquely is an opportunity for children to interpret and express their emotions. In this way, our drama programming provides the opportunity to develop emotional intelligence. The work our Artist-Educators do at the PRC, we have learned, gives the children the special opportunity to understand and express their feelings. These skills, which include understanding physical communication, gesture, facial expression, and interpretation, foster multimodality and are skills that would not be developed otherwise at PRC.

## Community-Building

Our programming has also contributed to the continuous process of building the PRC community. We have learned that many parents come to the PRC only for our drama sessions. Other parents, whose older children attend the local school, come to the drama session instead of going directly home from school. It seems that our programming has become a key point of focus in their agenda. This programming has also allowed us to develop a relationship with this new community in a variety of ways that extend beyond our educational outreach programming. For example, this group has allowed us insight into the developmental stages of young pre-school aged children, which contributes to our professional artistic programming for this age group, specifically.



## Next Steps

One thing that has come up again and again is the need to better include the caregivers and to equip them with the skills to take an active role in their children's and their own learning. Their participation and engagement continues to increase because the Artist-Educators have really learned how to demand and build in their participation directly. Still, this needs constant work and development. One suggestion from the PRC staff was to provide a workshop for caregivers with translation provided, because it would give them the opportunity to experience first-hand the work their children are involved in and to speak about what they see to be the value and, more importantly, to discern how they might be able to contribute themselves.

It would also be wonderful to bring greater technical and theatrical elements into the PRC environment. More sensory elements could work well in terms of engagement and learning, such as lighting or audio elements. That said, the physical space of the PRC is a difficult space in which to work, in part due to the drop-in nature of the program, as well as due to the multiple stimuli that can grab the children's attention. However, perhaps we could make better use of the space and expand beyond the carpet. With regard to the drop-in nature of the program, we need to emphasize the continuity of the program in order to increase participation and engagement. Continuity, in this sense, refers to thematic continuity and skill-building, as well as intergenerational dialogue and cross-community planning, to ensure that what we are doing is culturally relevant to this community.

Another key part of the programming, which has become evident this year, is the value of seeing or observing to the creative process. Many of the children and their caregivers visited our theatre

to act as the test audience for *Jack and the Giant Beanstalk*. The following drama session, the children were dramatizing more than ever – they seem to have finally understood what it means to “do drama”. During the reading of the story, for instance, the students were becoming and enacting certain elements before prompting. They were invested and active participants. Many more of them remained engaged throughout the session. Having seen drama modelled for them, they were better able to create it themselves. Increasing their engagement with professional theatre would bolster their own investment and skill development in terms of dramatic play. A stronger link between the work we are doing there and the professional theatre work here at YPT needs to be made.