

One Drama for All? Responding to the *Primary School Curriculum* for Drama in the Special Class

The new *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) gives drama a valued position in schools. In welcoming this development, the author offers some considerations for the adaptation of the drama curriculum for use in special education. The views expressed are those of a special class teacher in a mainstream school, though it is hoped they have general relevance to the education of all children with special educational needs.

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INTRODUCTION

In the not too distant past, an article such as this would have been concerned with making a case for using drama in the classroom. Now, with the arrival of the revised *Primary School Curriculum* (Ireland, 1999b), it is gratifying to have reached a stage where the position of drama is guaranteed. There, drama in the classroom is defined as,

...a creative process that allows children to explore the full potential of drama as a learning experience. It is improvisational in nature and has as its aim a quest for knowledge that involves every aspect of the child's personality, spiritual, moral, emotional, intellectual and physical. (p.2)

Though not addressing itself greatly to special education, the curriculum documents later state that because of its nature and the unique learning experience it has to offer, drama is particularly relevant to children with special needs. "It can be of enormous benefit both in terms of affective and cognitive development" (p. 20). It is most useful to have drama thus described. In these days of accountability drama activities might be undervalued in the special class, seen perhaps as a means of providing a break from 'real' learning experiences or as a period of relaxation to prepare for more learning. Equally, special classes in mainstream schools now tend to be integrated. Because of this, the special class teacher may concentrate on numeracy and literacy. What then of the value of creative processes in the special class? There is ample research to show how accessing creativity can aid cognitive development (Torrence, 1962; Jones, 1972; Foster, 1971).

THE ABILITY TO PLAY

Winnicott (1971) writes that, "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self" (p. 54). It is the playful nature of dramatic processes which should make it attractive to children. *Primary School Curriculum, Drama* records that drama skills are "as natural to the younger child as playing and need only careful support and nurturing to extend them into continuing to serve the child's education" (Ireland, 1999a, p. 6). Certainly the nature of drama is

playful and there is psychological evidence of the value of play. What is the child doing when he engages in play? For Vygotsky (1967), play facilitates creativity. It is not simply a recollection of past experiences but a creative reworking that “combines impressions and construct forming new realities addressing the needs of the child” (p.7). The common denominator for Landy (1986) “between the wide range of play theories is the dramatic nature of play, a dialect between the actual every day reality and the imaginable one” (p. 30). The paradox of play, like drama, is that something is real and not real at the same time. We behave as if our roles and interactions are real whilst knowing they are not. It may however be simplistic of the revised curriculum to state that play, though very desirable, comes naturally to all children.

Children with special needs are often less flexible in their behaviour than other children because they have a limited capacity for adapting their actions or responses to unexpected events. In the special class there may be children who, besides having mild general learning difficulties, present with additional difficulties. These children may well be hampered in their ability to play. The work of Cook and Williams (1985) outlines some possible difficulties. There may be a delay in play due to learning difficulty. Physical, visual or hearing difficulties may limit the kind of play available. Children with emotional difficulties may exhibit abnormal play patterns. Speech or language delay may restrict play development. Opportunities for play may be limited due to lack of toys, space, time or someone to play with. The ability to engage in play is shown to be essential toward being creative. Children with special needs may need help and encouragement to become playful and their teachers need to bear this in mind.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE DRAMA CURRICULUM

On studying the drama documents of the revised primary school curriculum, one is struck by the amount of work which has gone into their production. Coming from the days of little official recognition to this fine curriculum is a major and welcome step. Though the author recognises that the curriculum was devised having mainstream education in mind, there are some areas which will need careful thought in drawing up a curriculum for use in special education. The drama curriculum is process orientated. It states, quite clearly, that the curriculum “will not dwell on the display element of drama” but will “emphasise the benefits to be gained from the process of exploring life through the creation of plot, theme, fiction and make believe” (Ireland, 1999a, p.5). The contribution of performance drama is sidelined since it “represents only a part of the rich learning and developmental experience that drama has to offer” (p.5). Drama is to be engaged with for the purpose of exploring feelings, knowledge and ideas leading to understanding. In the author’s opinion it is a pity this stand has been taken.

PERFORMANCE

Many teachers initially get involved in using drama through working towards some form of production. For children in a special class who may be hard to motivate the idea of performance can be quite an incentive. Though the drama curriculum acknowledges that performance drama has certain benefits, such as developing self-confidence, it is on the process of drama that the curriculum concentrates. Whilst it is a fact that teachers will have a concern for the idea of children with special needs ‘parroting’ learned lines, and whilst we will have watched the dreaded Nativity, where yet again the ‘child’ is dropped, and wondered – what has this to do with education? –

such dismissal of the performance element of drama is, in the author's view, misjudged. If we examine the Art section of the revised curriculum we see how teachers are encouraged to use the Great Masters as part of their work. To dismiss performance as part of drama is to ignore a vital element of the art form in favour of the process, i.e. exploring life through plot, theme, fiction and make believe.

This debate between process and performance seems to have existed for a long time and it was to be hoped that a modern curriculum might have seen greater integration between the two. The work of various leaders in the field has supported this. Bolton (1984) writes of the dialectical relationship which exists between process and performance and calls for "greater fluidity between the two modes than which has been acceptable" (p.125). More recently, Neelands (1998) echoes this point. Perhaps a danger lies in the over literal interpretation of 'performance' in drama, i.e. as requiring an audience. The outside audience is not necessarily involved, yet, in the author's belief, performance is an integral part of the drama; for example, if I am playing a boy lost in the train station, by listening to myself and by judging how others in the drama are responding to me, I can become sadder, more frightened, etc. I am using audience to help me step into someone else's shoes.

The curriculum, rightly, asks that the children strive for sincerity in their work. To do this – perhaps especially with children in the special class – we will need to challenge them, 'push' them to the best of their ability. Otherwise, efforts may be sloppy. So it is when teacher calls "Stop," "Show us that again," or "Look how Mary is doing this" that a performance element comes in. Since the curriculum does not draw distinctions in the use of the word 'performance' a teacher may lack confidence to work as outlined above. In working with children in a special class or those having special needs this constant rehearsal, repeating, showing, has, I believe, special relevance.

PROCESS

Michael Finneran (2000) writing in *Drama Times* points out confusion and inconsistency in curriculum documents relating to how a child interacts with the fictional context in a drama lesson (p.3). Is it to be 'enactment' or 'living through?' Again these ideas have been much debated in educational drama literature. Heathcote (1984) would encourage 'living through' – becoming someone else in order to see how it feels. More recent writers, e.g. Neelands (1998) are more accepting of the process of 'enactment' which in no way reduces the child's level of participation. The revised curriculum seems confused on which we should aim for. It states we aim for the "making of story through enactment" (Ireland, 1999b, p.2) "playing of characters" (p.38) then later "the essence of drama is story ... in which certain characters live out the consequences" (p.48). Perhaps a curriculum devised for children with special needs might best decide on the 'enactment' approach where children learn through 'pretending' (Peter, 1994), rather than the more Stanislavsky involvement in which the children 'become' the characters.

STRUCTURE

The layout of the mainstream drama curriculum is based on the idea that drama should be advanced in a developmental way. Thus, it is difficult for the teacher of the special class to choose where his/her pupils may be placed in the activities suggested. Though

it will not always be so, very often children in the special class are developmentally some years behind their mainstream peers. A drama curriculum for children with special needs might instead be based around developing different areas of the child's life. Jennings (1983) and later Catherach (1992) offer models for learning in drama which might well serve as a basis for such a curriculum. The models suggested, which seem most useful, are:

<p>creative expressive model tasks and skills model self advocacy model</p>
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Creative Expressive Model

Much of the revised drama curriculum outlines activities which would come under this model – the focus is on the strengths of people and the stimulus of the work is to discover creative potential. There is exploration through play, with emphasis on communication, verbal or non-verbal. There is exploration of ideas and environments beyond personal experience.

Tasks and Skills Model

This model involves general social skills and learning appropriate social interaction through the use of drama. It may involve focusing on activities to confront participants' weaknesses and aims to help overcome these weaknesses. For example, children in the special class, though reluctant at reading, might have to use reading to solve clues in order to defuse a bomb! Children, in role, may have to prepare interviews as detectives, using appropriate language. Thus the drama complements other areas of the curriculum. This type of activity may prove very useful in a crowded special class timetable.

Self Advocacy Model

In this kind of work the drama activities may be employed in order to explore personal situations and hopefully enable change. Much of the drama work in this model is concerned with helping the children to 'find their voice.' Pupils with special needs are entitled to a say in the way their world is shaped, both in school and in the community. In order that they may express their ideas in a constructive way they require self-confidence and communication and language skills. A drama curriculum, through its blend of imagined experience and social learning, can give a platform for this vital developmental work.

DRAMA CONVENTIONS

Drama conventions are played down in the curriculum. It is a puzzle as to why this should be so. In other curriculum areas, e.g. Maths and SESE, teachers are offered suggestions as to how to teach various skills. These drama conventions – the 'nuts and bolts' of the drama session – are essential to know how to proceed. Yet, the drama curriculum documents only refer to convention on pages 97 and 98 (Ireland, 1999b). Noting this, Finneran (2000) offers as a possible explanation the fact that this curriculum will have to stick around for a while and that conventions and "curriculum documents can become rapidly dated" (p.4). This is undeniably true, yet the author would recommend that a drama curriculum for special education might restore the

balance. To leave out this most relevant and practical information assumes incorrectly that all teachers have advanced skills in drama teaching, or will readily go to the various drama books available for more information. A simple, practical help in the curriculum documents would have been to have grouped the various bibliographical references to help those not so familiar with drama literature. Surely this engagement is what we need to prevent the curriculum becoming just another dust gathering endeavour. The work of Melanie Peter (1994) offers suggestions which could be utilised in drawing up a 'conventions' section in a curriculum for special needs (p. 31).

It is very heartening to see the drama curriculum place such emphasis on the affective value of engaging in drama. The importance of developing such areas as self-esteem, self-worth and relationships is very important in the special class. It is unfortunate, however, that curriculum documents fall short of outlining, in any great detail, how drama might be used in a cross-curricular fashion. An adapted curriculum for special needs might attempt this, offering practical ideas as to how drama activities might enhance study in other areas. In this manner, teachers in integrated special classes, often faced with little time on a packed timetable, might see how drama fits in and becomes a productive and efficient use of precious time.

CONCLUSION

Such students are entitled to access to a full educational experience but the pathways they need to take and the time they need to achieve this may be different from many of their mainstream peers. However, the aim will be same, the realisation of their potential as unique human beings both now and in the future. (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999, p.18)

Having considered some aspects of our new drama curriculum as they might apply in special education, the question still remains, "Is there one drama for all?" Addressing the same question, Taylor (cited in Peter, 1994) analyses it thus: "In terms of deep structure the drama lesson has certain essential elements detectable at entry level of learning. In terms of surface structure it is immensely flexible" (p.19).

Ultimately, it will be we teachers who decide how we engage in the challenges of drama. Without our engagement, any curriculum will fail to achieve its potential. In the revised primary school curriculum for drama we have a wonderful basis and inspiration for our work. With some adaptations, and perhaps highly different focusing, it is the author's belief we can devise an adapted drama curriculum to support us as we lead our children on their own pathways towards the muse which is drama.

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