

Dramatherapy for Special Needs

Dramatherapy is a structured, developmental approach to the child's exploration of the world through play. It is a particularly useful framework for highlighting individual special needs in communication and expression and for developing structures which address these needs.

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WHAT IS DRAMA ?

In order to describe what drama is, it is useful to highlight the distinction between Drama and Theatre. "The Theatre is largely concerned with communication between actors and an audience; Drama is largely concerned with experience by the participants, irrespective of any function of communication to an audience" (Way, 1967). Therefore when we speak of Drama it is the dramatic process that we are interested in; it is this process which has the potential to enrich the life of the participants. Our overall aim is not, as might be commonly assumed, to produce a show/display but to facilitate this process.

DRAMA FOR SPECIAL NEEDS

Children without learning difficulties may attend drama sessions at school or privately where they create their own impersonations with minimum guidance from the drama teacher.

Mentally handicapped children can be as creative and imaginative as their peers provided that they are stimulated in these areas. However, stories and impersonations etc. have their limitations with the mentally handicapped person, unless he/she follows a structured developmental approach.

While it may seem contradictory to structure a creative session, a carefully planned programme, geared to the participants' needs and strengths, actually facilitates personal growth, creativity and awareness.

DRAMA: A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH

In the context of creativity and personal growth, as human beings, our modes of interacting with our environment, i.e. movement, play, games, puppetry, and role-play vary according to the developmental stage at which we are functioning. Dramatherapy acknowledges this developmental unfolding of abilities and interests and categorises the normal stages through which children may "dramatically" explore their world. These stages are never mutually exclusive of one another, but they provide a useful focus for our interventions and ensure that we acknowledge the level to which each child is capable of participating. This developmental approach to dramatherapy is particularly useful when working with children who are mentally handicapped as it can be seen as a framework against which to highlight their individual needs and develop structures which answer those needs.

MOVEMENT

Once a young baby can crawl he/she begins to explore the environment and accordingly learns about objects and discovers the various textures of the carpet, the walls, etc. All these experiences will in turn boost the child's awareness and the development of the senses. All these experiences are particularly vital to the academic, psychological, and emotional development of the mentally handicapped child.

PLAY

"Play is an inborn and vital part of young life. It is not an activity of idleness, but it is rather the child's way of thinking, relaxing, remembering, daring, testing, creating and absorbing." It is, in fact, life (Slade, 1954). Play is a child's form of drama.

Play sessions are of benefit to all children, but they are of particular benefit to mentally handicapped children and particularly to all those who have delayed language. "Play toys will provide a child with a vocabulary that is a means of facilitating the exploration and expression of her/his thoughts" (Klein, 1970). It has been our experience that often a child who is quiet and reticent in the classroom will blossom and develop through child drama: play.

GAMES

Games are a vital and popular aid in using drama with mentally handicapped pupils. Many schools of drama use games to develop skills in would-be professional actors/actresses. We can also adapt a lot of these and other games to develop communication skills in the mentally handicapped person. When running game sessions we take into consideration past experience and age of the participants, and from this we implement an appropriate programme. Games provide us with a starting point and are invaluable when working with reluctant adolescents. After playing a few carefully selected games they begin to enjoy themselves and become absorbed in the process of drama.

PUPPETRY

Puppetry has a lot to offer children and adolescents, particularly those with impaired language and speech. To be a puppeteer is to be a modeller, painter, needle worker, carpenter, actor and musician. I have included puppetry as an optional part of this programme because I have found that the success of such a programme will depend entirely on the motivation and interest of the group members.

ROLE-PLAY

Role-play is a medium which is used in many group settings, varying from leisure drama groups to insight therapeutic groups. Role-play does not necessarily involve the expression of deep feelings but instead provides an opportunity to work out alternative and more effective approaches to common problems.

When I speak of role-play, I refer to creating a scene whereby the group members are given an opportunity to enact a situation which will provide them with improved coping skills which in turn will enrich their lives, e.g. preparation for a visit to hospital or a restaurant etc.

Role-play can often cause a lot of apprehension on the part of leaders, e.g. the use of play and games comes more naturally but leaders tend to stop short of using role-play as they believe this requires more theatrical and indeed theoretical skills and more ability on the part of the child. However while there is a certain amount of truth in this, role-play can be used successfully with mentally handicapped groups when there has been adequate preparation.

Role-play will be easier for the mentally handicapped child if a developmental approach has been followed. Through play and games the child will have already been indirectly preparing for role-play. By engaging in social play a child has already enacted simple role-plays around hospitals, shops etc. Later on through drama games, characteristics required for role-play can be refined through selected drama games e.g. voice games, observation games, movement games etc. Role-play is a vital learning tool for the child with learning difficulties if such a developmental approach is adhered to.

GUIDELINES FOR RUNNING DRAMA SESSIONS

This section includes a list of guidelines which will help group leaders who plan to run drama sessions. For a more comprehensive list refer to "Creative Drama in Group Work" (Jennings, 1986).

1. The use of a large airy room which is away from constant interruptions will create a secure and encouraging environment. A shy, reticent child will respond favourably if he/she feels secure in the knowledge that there will be no interruptions.
2. It is important that a group membership is consistent; as the life of a group develops so does the cohesion between members, new members invariably upset the cohesion and trust among existing members.
3. The duration and boundaries of the group should be stated from the onset of the group. A weekly 30 minute period weekly for a school term during the academic year has been most successful in most settings.
4. Planning time is vital. It is a mistake to run a session without having previously sat down (with co-leader if available) to plan and evaluate the content of every session.

CONCLUSION

If all these suggestions are adhered to, drama sessions can be a delightful experience both for the participants and the leaders. Dramatherapy can be adapted to any level of ability/age and there is no doubt that mentally handicapped pupils "learn by doing". The word drama comes from the Greek word "Droa" which means "I do; I struggle." It is by doing this that the child discovers life and self through emotional and physical attempt, through repetitive practice. Needless to say, many aspects of dramatherapy can be beneficial to all children and adolescents, and not only to those with learning difficulties.

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