

The Arts and the Communicative Needs of the Disadvantaged Child

Communication is basic to child development but it is often a need acutely felt by the child from a disadvantaged background who is failing at school. Through the symbolic power of the arts alternative modes of communication can be effectively explored.

SIOBHAN MAHER is a primary teacher in Scoil Mhuire, Sandymount, Dublin. She has also worked as a remedial teacher in a Dublin inner city school.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of life of an individual can be sustained and improved through the ability to communicate with others. The human being constantly strives for meaning. Piaget and Inhelder (1985) maintain that communication is basic to a child's development. It plays a central role in the life of a person and satisfies many of the human needs. The need to communicate is universal but it is a need acutely felt by the disadvantaged child who is failing at school. The arts, as intentional meaning-making processes and as symbolic modes of inquiry and communication allow opportunities for the disadvantaged child to effectively fulfil his or her communicative needs.

THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD

The child who is suffering from social deprivation frequently experiences learning problems at school. Socio-cultural deprivation underlies educational disadvantage (Blackwell, 1976). As Lovetan and Umans (1966) have explained:

We now understand the enormous effect of deprivation on learning. More and more the evidence is piling up that grinding poverty, because of its detrimental physical effect on the mother and its concomitant stunting of stimulation in the growing child, is a powerful factor in causing the educational retardation of the children of the poor.

This child faces problems in verbal and reasoning skills, which according to

Bereiter and Englemann (1966) can be combined under the general rubric of the ability to manipulate symbols. This child needs opportunities to overcome language inadequacy. The arts can help in the process of communication and ultimately can help the disadvantaged child to function more wholly in life.

THE ARTS AS FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

The term communication moves beyond its use as a synonym for language and can be used for the more general facility to receive and to transmit information. Thus communication is about sharing emotion, the ability to imitate, to empathise, as well as the ability to speak a language (Newson, 1982). While language is a very important tool for communication, it is not the sole way of transmitting one's message. In fact, language is such a complex phenomenon that it is one which the disadvantaged child frequently finds painfully difficult to master. The child who is failing in language or in numeracy skills may not experience the same learning difficulties in the arts (Sharp and Dust, 1990). This child deserves opportunities to discover the arts, to communicate through the arts and thus to fulfill that universal need to connect with other human beings through media which are non-threatening and ultimately sensitive to the individual's sense of personal worth.

According to Langer (1969), language is inadequate in conceptualising all that human beings know. Hence, the need exists to nurture artistic expression. The arts provide alternative ways of communication. As Pearl Primus explained, "through the arts, the human being's oldest and strongest means of communication, we can reach into the inner being of all children and all adults" (Primus, 1966, p.47).

Ultimately, we know more than we can tell (Polanyi, 1966). The problem arises in how to communicate it. For the disadvantaged child with poor linguistic competency, words can be a barrier to communication. This child however, can find expression for feelings, thoughts and experiences in the arts (Bruce, 1969). Our educational system ought to provide opportunities for communication for the disadvantaged child. The development of communicative skills through the arts helps the disadvantaged child to reach out and to be reached by others, to transmit and to receive through the creative experience involved. The Gulbenkian Report (1985) recognised the value of the arts for the learning-disabled child in providing alternative ways of communication. It explained that "some languages do not require verbal communication at all: there are whole 'languages' of meaning which have no direct need of words. They are, nonetheless, exceedingly

rich and complex forms of talking to other people” (Gulbenkian Report, 1985, p.9-10).

MOVEMENT

Movement is one of the most basic of all languages. Words may describe the ingredients of movements but the experience of communicating happens in what Violet Bruce calls “the speaking out” with the body (Bruce, 1969, p.162). In drama and dance, where imagination emerges symbolically or realistically, the child learns to communicate through movement. Most children find expression through movement, be it mime, dance or dance drama, an easier language than that of the spoken word (Bruce, 1969). Through the arts the child can also communicate more easily about his or her inner life. The difficulties, fears, worries and longings may emerge more easily in the expressive symbolism of the arts in the written or spoken word.

MUSIC

Music can be said to begin where words leave off. It reaches deep into the recesses of the human psyche in the pursuit of meaning and helps individuals to communicate an emotional or an intellectual message in an equally valid but different way to the linguistic mode. Research by Juliette Alvin (1966) found that disadvantaged children were particularly responsive to music. The form, structure and meaning in music appealed to the children and music was thus a valuable means of communication and progressive development for the child. Moreover she viewed the perception of form and structure as being essential for the training of the mind, since musical form is akin to the form of the spoken language.

SYMBOLISM

The agreed use of symbols allows communication. Meaning is thus embodied in and created through symbols (Curriculum and Examinations Board, 1985). The C.E.B. Report also explained that “the apprehension, formulation and communication of meaning requires the use of symbols. The creation and sharing of meaning requires the use of symbols. The creation and sharing of meaning is a necessary condition for personal and social development.” Every human being needs to become skilled in the use of symbols for expression and for the comprehension of experience. The arts as symbolic systems can allow this to happen. This report also pointed out that the verbal and numeracy systems which

tend to dominate the curriculum are “far from the only symbol systems necessary to become a fully productive and understanding member of our culture.”

Langer (1969) has identified two types of symbols in communication, the discursive and the presentational, with the arts belonging to the latter mode. For the disadvantaged child the heavy projection of the discursive mode within the educational system is a discriminating factor in communication. The child is simply confused by the myriad of discursive, linguistic images. The disadvantaged child has a special need to be put in touch with the symbolic systems of the arts. An acquaintance with the symbolism therein can open up new avenues of communication and help to develop the child's full faculties. Familiarity with artistic symbolism can also have a transference quality in helping the child deal with linguistic symbolism.

In the final analysis then, the complex process of communication is a learned function and the environment in which the learning takes place has an important influence on the quality of the skills mastered (Hardy, 1970). The intervention of the teacher in introducing the disadvantaged child to carefully planned arts programmes and in allowing guided discovery opportunities for the child in the symbolic systems of the arts, will awaken the communicative capacities of the child. Peter Brinson has explained that the uniqueness of human existence exists above all, in our capacity to appraise and communicate our experiences of the world. For this we need “all the ‘languages’ of understanding and communication available to us” (Brinson, 1985, p.52). The arts belong to that wider body of languages which can unfold the mystery of human communication and so help the disadvantaged child function more effectively in life.

CONCLUSION

Through the arts, the disadvantaged child has the opportunity to transmit to others the essential message he or she wishes to communicate. Authentic and profound communication is possible through the symbolism of the arts forms which reach below the level of consciousness. Body language, visual representation and musical sounds all communicate profound meaning and allow the disadvantaged child to explore alternative modes of communication. An acquaintance with symbolism in the visual and acoustic arts will serve to help the child in the mastery of the symbolic systems of the literary arts. Ultimately the educational process must seek to liberate the disadvantaged child's communicative potentialities in order that he or she may function effectively in life. Communication is, after all, a core element of human functioning and thus

education must be concerned with developing the capacity of the child to communicate fully and effectively in life. An education grounded in the arts can ably facilitate this process.

REFERENCES

- Alder, R.B. and Rodman, G. (1982). *Understanding Human Behaviour*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Alvin, J. (1966). *Forward Trends International Conference Proceedings*.
- Bereiter, C. and Engelmann, S. (1966). *Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Pre-School*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Blackwell, F. (1976). *Conference Proceedings on the Diversity of Education for the Disadvantaged in Britain*. London: The Bernard Van Leer Foundation.
- Brinson, P. (1985). *The Dancer and the Dance*. Dublin: The Arts Council.
- Bruce, V. (1969). *Awakening the Slower Mind*. London: Pergamon.
- Curriculum and Examinations Board, (1985). *The Arts in Education*. Dublin: Curriculum and Examinations Board.
- Gulbenkian Report, (1985). *The Arts in Schools*. London: C. Gulbenkian Foundation.
- Inhelder, B., and Piaget, J. cited by Nigel Proctor, (1985). "From Basics to Aesthetics". *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol.25, No.1.
- Hardy, W. G. (1970). *Communication and the Disadvantaged Child*. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins
- Langer, S. (1969). *Philosophy in a New Key*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lovetan, J.O., and Umans, S. (1966). *Teaching the Disadvantaged*. Columbia, New York: Teachers' College Press.

Newson, J. (1982). "Dialogue and Development" *Aspects of Education*.
London: Wiley.

Polanyi, M. (1966). *The Tacit Dimension*. New York: Doubleday and Co.

Primus, P. (1966). "Dance, Title 1 and the Performing Arts".
National Conference on Education for the Disadvantaged.

Sharp, C., and Dust, K. (1990). *Artists in Schools*. London: N.F.E.R.