

# Using Drama In Special Education

Drama as a process rather than a product can facilitate rich therapeutic and learning experiences. With the Drama Games approach it is more important to appreciate fun than to cultivate expertise.

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Although no precise figures are available, it is my suspicion that Drama within Special Education is hardly, if ever, used by teachers in special classrooms. This in itself is not a reflection on teachers in Special Education as Drama within the "normal" classroom is probably also under-utilized as a teaching resource or approach.

There are many reasons for this situation but among the most important I would include the following:-

## 1. Bad Experiences

Many teachers' experience of Drama is limited to their own schooldays when they were cajoled or coerced into annual seasonal productions such as school plays, pageants etc. Since their own schooldays they may have never participated in any form of Drama other than this performance. Whilst these experiences of school plays/productions etc. need not of themselves leave a bad taste in the mouth of the performers, if this is ones only experience of Drama, it may tend to disort ones perception of the potential of Drama within the situation.

## 2. The Confusion between Drama and Theatre

Most people, whether teachers or not, tend to equate Drama with Theatre. With reference to the title of this article, I would make a very important distinction between the two. Theatre is essentially a product, i.e. the audience pay money to see a show which is the finished product of a period of rehearsal and creativity for the actors and director etc. The emphasis in Theatre is on an external public performance which is concerned with demonstrating and communicating to the audience. Bolton (1986) considers that Drama is more about a process i.e. that it is experiential for the participants, more spontaneous than Theatre, not repeatable or with the emphasis on the internal effects on the participants. This distinction is an important one particularly when we come to the use of Drama in Special Education. My own approach to Drama in Special Education is primarily concentrating on Drama as a process, i.e. what happens to the participants, why

they are doing it. I would not deny the value of Drama as a product, i.e. school plays etc., rather for the ordinary class teacher in the ordinary classroom, whether it be Special Education or otherwise, the value of Drama in this mode is superior to that of Drama as a product.

### **3. The Need for Talent/Skill**

Perhaps another reason why many teachers shy away from the use of Drama in classrooms is the feeling of personal inadequacy in dramatic skills, whether that be acting or producing. Whilst it is obviously important to have a certain knowledge of ones creative medium (whether this be art, music, dance or drama), it is not of over-riding importance to be necessarily a good Actor or Producer to be able to use Drama effectively in the classroom. It is my belief that anyone with minimal acting talent can learn to use Drama within his or her classroom very effectively and very quickly without having recourse to performance or production. I shall return to this point further down in the article.

The above are the three main reasons, I believe, why teachers in Special Education are reluctant, or unwilling, to use Drama as a daily teaching medium within their classroom. One approach which I have found successful in using with teachers in Special Education and other staff is the Drama Games approach based on the work of Warren (1984) and Spolin (1981). This work grew out of the Actors Training approach which involves creating instant games and situations to teach Actors various technical aspects of their profession, such as spontaneity, body awareness, voice control etc. Another influence in the development of my use of Drama Games with mentally handicapped people in St. Michael's House is the use of Games in Therapy based on the work of Schaefer (1986) and Bond (1986). The combination of these two approaches which are quite diverse into single unified approach within the Special Education classroom has I believe, many advantages for teachers who may not be very "skilled" in the traditional dramatic crafts but who may wish to extend their use of Drama within their own classroom.

### **What are Drama Games**

The term "Drama Game" grew out of the use of exercises and games in the teaching of acting techniques for professional Actors. Some are better known as Party Games, Children's Street Games or Victorian Parlour Games. Thus, although these Drama games originated from the world of Theatre they have since been extended beyond the scope of Theatre to a variety of therapeutic and teaching situations. The main element in a Drama Game is, I

believe, one of fun, i.e. the people taking part in it should be able to derive some enjoyment from it. Without this element of fun the possible therapeutic or learning experience may be either devalued or totally lost, e.g., a game such as Simon Says or Grandmother's Footsteps, can be used by the teacher in a classroom to teach body awareness, knowledge of body parts, position in space or to teach certain kind of movements such as quick light movements etc., depending on the specific purposes for which the teacher wants to use the game. There are many books now on the market which have lots of suggestions for the use of Drama Games but amongst the best I have found are Warren (1981), Jennings (1986), Bond (1986) and Brandes and Phillips (1977).

### **DRAMA GAME**

#### *Magic Bag*

1. Teacher produces a bag (or mimes an imaginary bag) from which a series of imaginary objects can be taken.
2. Teacher says: "This is a Magic Bag which has lots of magic things in it which you cannot see but you can feel, touch or smell them."
3. The invisible object, described by the teacher, is passed carefully from person to person then put back in the bag.
4. Objects with a strong sensory element work best e.g. smelly socks, hot potato, bubbles, lead cannonball etc.

### **Why use Drama Games**

There are many possible reasons why Drama Games might be used within a classroom but among the most significant are the following:-

#### **1. Observation**

The teacher can observe the child in the very naturalistic environment within the context of a game. How the child plays the game (passive/dependent, aggressive, fearful, obsessional) can reveal important information for the teacher as to the child's ability to cope with peers.

#### **2. Motivation**

Drama Games can provide an important motivational element which allows the teacher to engage the child which other approaches may lack.

#### **3. Self-Expression**

An important element of Drama Games is their separation from reality-"it's only a

game". This familiar phrase is often a powerful psychological cue for the loosening of restraints and relaxing of defences. The intense emotional involvement of players in a Drama Game, often results in the expression of feelings, thoughts, and attitudes that ordinarily would not be disclosed. This gives the child an opportunity to express them in a safe context.

#### **4. Cognitive Skills**

Such as memory concentration, anticipating consequences, reflectivity, problem-solving, may all be developed through Drama Games. These aspects of Drama Games may be particularly relevant for teachers working with children who have special educational needs.

#### **5. Socialisation**

The ability to interact with other people in an appropriate manner in various social situations is one of the chief criteria for mental health. For people whose problems stem from a failure in the socialization process, (such as delinquents, or depressed children) Drama Games can offer the opportunity to experience positive peer pressure and acceptance in a non-threatening atmosphere.

#### **6. Pleasure**

Games, in order to work, must be fun. Drama Games offer the opportunity for fun and pleasure to be a direct aim within a particular drama session. Gardner (1973) holds that pleasure, in moderation, is a potent medicine for alleviating psychological disturbance.

#### **7. Specific Educational Objectives**

Drama Games can be structured so that specific aims and objectives by the teacher can be incorporated into the Drama lesson or session. For example, Drama Games can be chosen and structured to meet such objectives as increasing the children's level of impulse control, building co-operation within the class, increasing the child's level of body awareness, identity and trust with peers.

### **Structure of Session**

The structure of a Drama Session, which I have found useful with mentally handicapped people, would be as follows:-

1. Warm-up or opening phase.
2. Development.
3. Closure.

### 1. Warm-up or Opening Phase

The purpose of this phase is to get the participants emotionally and mentally prepared for action. Simple activities such as Musical Chairs or Sharks help to get the group moving around using their bodies and provides both an imaginative and physical warm-up for the later parts of the session.

### 2. Development

This section depends to a large extent on what the purpose of the Drama Session is in the teacher's mind, e.g. if the teacher wanted to work on position in space and body awareness, Drama Games which focus on such activities as right/left discrimination or movement in a particular direction after a particular signal would be used. Examples of these would be activities such as *Bombs Away* or *Bing Bong* or *Simon Says*.

### 3. Closure

It is important having brought a group through a session that the participants get a chance to come down from whatever "high" they may be on. Whether the "high" was brought on by role-play or games, it is important to bring pupils down to earth again. Relaxation activities are particularly useful here, such as the group sitting in a circle saying what they felt about the lesson or about the activities, or a simple group Back Massage.

### A Note of Caution

Jennings (1986) has some very sound advice for anyone who is planning to run Drama Sessions. Amongst the advice she gives is to remember that Drama is not simply a collection of techniques and games, but rather a creative process which can operate at a very profound level psychologically. The teacher should be sensitive to the group's changing needs and moods, and to know where they are at or where they are ready to go. The teacher's role in a drama session is somewhat different to the normal classroom role of a teacher. The role to aim for as a Drama Leader is to be one of catalyst rather than controller. If a pupil wants to opt out of a particular drama game or exercise I would always respect that choice of the child rather than forcing them to do things they do not want to do.

Some drama games which are highly stimulating and active may not be appropriate for hyperactive or emotionally disturbed children. Role-play itself can have its own dangers in that pretending to be someone else might be a disturbing experience for pupils who are not fully aware of their own identity.

## Conclusions

Although many people would equate Drama with Theatre, I have drawn a distinction between the two and have concentrated on the use of Drama as a process within the Special Education classroom which the teacher, with very little acting skill, might use successfully for specific educational aims and objectives. The use of Drama Games is one specific medium within the overall use of Drama which can be particularly useful in the special classroom. The rationale of Drama Games is theoretically sound, both within Special Education and within the more specific area of Actors' Training. I have outlined briefly a possible structure for sessions together with some suggestions of specific educational objectives in certain Drama Games.

The note of caution sounded at the end is an attempt to draw the reader's attention to the potential of Drama to be mis-used and abused. Common sense is the sine qua non of any teaching or group leadership in this type of approach.

Finally, remember that the only way to embark on a journey is to take the first step.

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