

# Drama: Reading, Writing and Speaking Our Way Forward

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# Chapter 1

## Looking at learning in classroom drama

Drama is both imaginatively engaging and a motivating tool for learning. It encompasses a wide range of practices which involve an act of pretence; these may include work with puppets and props, bringing play scripts to life, small world table top role play, watching and creating theatre, and improvisational classroom drama. The latter involves children in exploring issues in role and improvising alongside their teacher in role, whether in the role play area or in whole class drama. Such drama is often referred to as process drama (Taylor and Warner, 2006), story drama (Booth, 1994) and/or classroom drama (Grainger and Cremin, 2001). Classroom drama, in which the emphasis is on the process not a final theatrical product, is the focus of this book.

Children bring their knowledge, skills, understanding and experience to classroom drama and the teacher's task is to structure and support their enquiries as they inhabit an imaginary world and reflect upon connections between this world and their own. Gradually children also become able to consider the aesthetic formation of their fictional world.

In classroom drama, teachers guide children's learning journeys through the careful use of different drama conventions, e.g. role play, hot seat, thought tracking, (as detailed in the Appendix ). The adroit use of such conventions in extended drama time (see Chapter 3) in literacy time (see Chapter 4), or in cross curricular contexts (see Chapter 5) enables teachers to focus on particular learning areas and ensure progression and continuity. In role play areas too, children can be challenged to learn imaginatively (see Chapter 2), solving problems and creating new ones as they do so. The key to ensuring learning is in the planning (see Chapter 6) and in the lived experience of the drama as teachers make professional decisions based on identified learning areas and the children's interests and ideas.

Through making, performing/sharing, and responding, children learn through drama and about drama and can develop many other skills and competencies. The learning areas particularly pertinent to drama include:

- The development of the whole child
- Language and literacy development
- The development of the imagination
- The content of the drama
- The drama processes
- Reflection.

### **The development of the whole child**

Drama allows children to develop personally and socially in secure imaginative contexts and helps them develop their 'tool box of literacy' (Claxton, 2000). It provides a link between cognitive and affective modes, enabling youngsters to look at contexts in all their complexity and consider their actions and the consequences (Hendy and Toon, 2001). In drama, children make connections between past and present knowledge and experience in order to establish and resolve dilemmas through their active engagement and decision making. Such dilemmas enable children to consider their own values through the 'prism of fiction' (Toye and Prendiville, 2000: 115). In supportive fictional environments, children can develop a richer understanding of themselves as they make sense of the world. This helps them to consider principles that distinguish right from wrong, and develop respect for others, examining issues of truth, equity and justice and the nature of citizenship. Imaginative situations often put children in a position of confronting ethical principles, personal values and moral codes of conduct (Winston, 1998). Opportunities for children to appreciate their own cultural traditions and the diversity and richness of other cultures also exist through drama. Stories from a range of traditions and cultures can be used to develop contexts for drama. Through drama children can also learn to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty (Grainger, 2003b) and develop their personal and social identities, as drama fosters a sense of community and ownership. Rooted in social interaction, drama is a powerful way to help children relate positively to each other, experience negotiation, and gain confidence and self-esteem.

## **Language and literacy development**

Drama can also make a real contribution to language and literacy development both in the context of literacy based activities and in extended drama time as well as in cross curricular contexts.

Talk is an essential part of the currency of drama. In fictional contexts, authentic reasons to communicate emerge and children are involved in discussing their ideas, generating possible responses in role, co-operating with others and adapting their speech for different purposes and audiences. In this present tense context for literacy learning, they are involved in experimenting with vocabulary and with language styles and registers appropriate to their role and the imaginary situation. The opportunity to reflect upon these choices also contributes to their growing command of the spoken word.

Drama also offers a valuable context for reading; it can be used to 'speak the silence of stories' (Hendy and Toon, 2001:76) and offers learners the chance to actively interrogate texts, exploring and making meaning as they take on roles and look beyond the words themselves. Children can co-author new and living fictions through drama and learn about the nature of reading as they investigate texts in classroom drama (Grainger, 1998).

In addition, the motivating power of drama can provide meaningful contexts for writing, both individually and collaboratively. In-role work can lead to emotive writing from different stances and perspectives and can make a real contribution to children's development as writers (e.g. Barrs and Cork, 2001; Grainger, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2004; Cremin *et al.*, 2006). Children become imaginatively involved in drama and generate ideas for writing through orally rehearsing and refining their views and listening to those of others as they create meaning visually, verbally and kinaesthetically.

## **The development of the imagination**

In drama, children are involved in working imaginatively to improvise and sustain different roles, offering ideas to develop and shape the drama and contributing to the problem solving agenda. In working creatively they construct and inhabit familiar and unfamiliar contexts, and develop credible and coherent alternative worlds in which they encounter the unknown. Children and adults must be prepared to take risks as they move forward together on this journey of discovery. Drama relies heavily upon the imagination and offers real opportunities for its development through the creation of a questioning stance and the exploration of different possibilities and perspectives (Cremin, 2004).

## **The content of the drama**

The content of each drama will relate to an area of the curriculum or life, so it can enable children to develop, use and refine their knowledge and understanding of this area. Drama can make a valuable contribution as children build on their understanding of events, issues or moral dilemmas, enabling them to articulate their voices in a wealth of cross curricular contexts (Toye and Prendiville, 2000; Griffiths, 1991). In investigating issues through drama they will be recognising both influences and turning points in the content frame of the drama and will be able to integrate and employ their factual knowledge with increasing accuracy and understanding.

## **The drama processes**

Through drama children extend their understanding and use of drama skills and conventions to investigate and communicate ideas (see Appendix for an annotated list of conventions). The use of metaphor and symbol, objects or icons that embody meaning in the context, as well as the roles, perspectives and tensions inherent in the situation are all significant components that give drama its challenge, motivation and power. Children are not just drawn to the plot or content, but also to the forms and conventions, which allow them to explore meaning and express their ideas (Neelands, 1998). They learn to select, shape and transform these conventions for themselves and become more adept at discussing the forms, using the drama processes and employing an increasingly critical language to describe and evaluate their drama.