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DRAMA: A TOOL FOR LEARNING

by

Heidi Lyne

Drama is integral to children's learning, and children are drawn to it naturally. It is a natural teaching tool which teachers can utilize, from the dramatic play of the three and four year old throughout the span of childhood years. Drama is active and it captures children's full attention. I believe it can be used across the disciplines and that it is our job as teachers to discover how best to use this natural learning medium. After working extensively with drama in my mixed third and fourth grade classroom, I have come to believe that it is the children who can show us how best to use drama.

My initial aim was to provide a lot of opportunity for drama experiences, and a lot of freedom for the children, and to then observe where they took the skills and opportunities that were offered to them. There were twenty-one children in the class last year. My team teacher and I both taught all subjects, including those that are considered in many schools to be "specials," like music, art, sports, science, and drama. We structured the class so that most of the day was taken up with independent or small group work. Each child was handed a folder on Mondays—in each folder children found assignments across the disciplines. A child might be assigned "Read to a younger child in the school," or "Measure the gym and find out if the basketball court is regulation size." In addition to these language and math assignments we asked the children to do such things as "Find two other children and schedule a time with a teacher to work on dribbling skills" or "Throw a pot on the electric wheel." We tried to plan one time each day when children were all doing the same thing at the same time, like reading, writing, discussing life skills, or learning a new art technique. Children came together in meetings to share what they had done throughout the week.

Because of our system, we were able each week to schedule drama in large groups twice and also to assign it to children in small groups. One of the large group meetings was run by a parent who has taught children's theater. She worked on theater games and scene study while my co-teacher and I led improvisation at the other large group meeting. The assigned small groups were allotted a week (more, if they asked for extra time) to create, plan, and work on dramatic performances. These were presented to the class on Friday afternoons, after which the class discussed them.

The quality of and the interest in dramatic productions grew steadily. Many children asked to do independent individual drama projects. Children could be heard daily practicing scenes or working out where their writing was going through improvisation. The children also started making movies; a group of them wrote a mystery in writing workshop, turned it into a screenplay, and filmed it. Drama took on a life of its own.

In class discussions about drama, it became clear that the children changed their view of acting over the course of the year. They initially thought of it as something fun that anybody could do without training; they grew to view it as a learned skill. The children also felt that working with drama and learning theater skills helped them in three ways over the year: in their self-confidence, in their respect for each other, and in their writing.

When we discussed drama as a class, many of the children's comments showed that they could see a direct link between theater and how they felt about themselves. "I used to feel nervous—not just about acting, but about everything. I don't so much now," said one child.

"It gives you confidence," added another.

And a third child, one who had social difficulties at the beginning of the school year but came to be accepted as a member of the group, said, "It helps other people not to make fun of you."

These children began feeling better about themselves and how they appeared to others, which directly affected the second way in which the children (and the teachers) perceived drama as having a noticeable impact. Our classroom was a very safe place in which to live and work. The children took care of each other in remarkable ways, and were respectful and supportive of each other always. One child said, during a class discussion about the year, "This is the only class I have ever been in where everybody in the class respects everybody else and treats each other as friends."

And, in an end-of-the-year reflection written by another child, we read, "This year has been the best of my life. I can't put into words how much at home I felt in our classroom. The feeling between us was like one big family. Everybody liked everybody else and there was respect everywhere. It was like we all shared the same feelings. It was like we were all one person. I've never felt that in any other class or group."

This was an unusual class in its cohesiveness, but the reasons for this were not immediately apparent when looking at individuals. The class had its share of difficult and troubled children—it was not a group of "superstars." Two children in particular were children who would probably be ostracized in another class, but were accepted and embraced by this class. When my co-teacher and I tried to examine the reasons for this strong sense of group, the concentration on drama seemed the strongest factor. We believe that the extensive risk-taking involved in serious drama leads to the necessary development of a safe atmosphere.

The children gave a great deal of themselves when on stage and rightly expected that what they gave would be treated with care by the rest of the class, who had all been in similar situations. It was remarkable to see the thoughtfulness with which every performance was greeted and to hear the ways the children learned to give constructive criticism while avoiding hurt. The consideration they showed each other was enviable, not just around drama, but in their everyday lives.

When we asked the children why they thought this was true, they had trouble putting their thoughts into words, but there was a clear sense of agreement throughout the class. "You just know the other kids won't make fun of you now," said one child.

"It helps to be someone else, to see how other people think," said another.

And a quiet, third grade girl who had no close friends but came to be accepted added, "Doing drama makes people want to do things with everybody."

The third way in which the children felt drama made a difference was in their writing. We hoped that they would see a connection between drama and writing, for one of our initial goals in bringing more drama to the classroom was to observe its effect on children's writing. During the large group meetings we often purposely linked theater and writing; we discussed how each

technique or improvisation could help the children when writing. We did theater games to further whatever we were studying in writing. For example, when we studied leads in writing, we worked on improvisational openings in drama; when we worked on getting ideas when writing is going nowhere, we created group stories and did theater games around storytelling; when we worked on how to end a story, we worked on creating good endings for our improvisations. By physicalizing the stories the children understood better how to write.

We also sometimes scheduled writing and drama together; children would do a theater game, then immediately write something related to it. For example, for one improvisation we placed two chairs in several different positions: face to face, side by side, and back to back. For each position, the children created an improvisation. We then placed the chairs in a new position—one upright and one lying on the floor—and asked the children to write about what had just happened to the occupants of the chairs. It seems easy for children to write when they are given a physical situation.

My co-teacher and I are very excited about everything the children wrote over the course of the school year, and feel that the concentration on drama is evident in their stories. They learned to develop a character in writing through working with theater games and improvisation. Many of them now do the same activity when writing that they learned in order to develop a theatrical character: they concentrate on that character until they know everything there is to know about her—what she had for breakfast, whether she has pets and what their names are, what time she likes to get up in the morning, etc. Their work shows clear evidence of full character development.

The children also came to realize the value of setting a scene, knowing not only who is in it but where the characters are and exactly what they are doing. This resulted in much more careful descriptions of setting than we had ever seen before in third and fourth grade writing. The children's stories are strong in part because the characters, settings, and details of action are well defined. After filming the screenplay, in which there is a classroom scene, one fourth grader wrote in her story, "The door opened and 22 heads turned expectantly." This child understands the value of describing the visual details of a scene.

A third grader saw his scene as vividly: "I ran for the door, snatched my lunch off the floor and galloped outside, slamming the door behind me." These children were not only writing; they were picturing the scene as they wrote; they were able to view the scene simultaneously as a visual stage scene and a printed story. The details of their writing reflect the images they visualize in ways that many young children's writing does not.

The dialogue in the children's stories, too, is rich, yet simple and direct. As an example, let's look at the dialogue between a dragon, Sellsa, and a little boy, James, as they come upon a man who has died in a plane crash. This was written by a third grader.

They went outside with the bottle of medicine in James' hand. But when they saw the man he was not breathing, he was just lying there. James did not know this but he found out soon enough. James said, "Is he alive?"

Sellsa bent against the man and did not hear anything and did not feel anything. He said in a sad way, "No, James, he's not."

"Oh," said James.

"James," said Sellsa, "Would you like to bury him and I will pick some flowers, or would you like to pick the flowers?"

"I think I will pick the flowers," said James.

We believe, and the children believe, that this kind of simple, meaningful writing is in part the result of drama experiences the children have had. With the benefit of a direct audience, they have learned for themselves what kind of dialogue is the most powerful. They know their characters so well that they instinctively know what each character would say in any situation. As one child said, during a discussion about how drama helps writing, "Writing is like improv, like when you're in the middle of a play and you forget your lines but you know your character so well you can just make them up. When you know your character, it's easy to write what they would say."

These are areas in which we teachers have seen noticeable development; the area of writing which the children feel is most directly affected by their work with drama is in getting ideas for writing when they are "stuck," whether for an idea or for the next step in their story. In one of our discussions, one child said, "Drama can help you with writing because if we have trouble with stories we can improvise and act it out to see what could happen."

Another child said, "If you have drama before writing workshop it can really help you get ideas."

Another added, "When we were acting the other day I got an idea that was so good that I wrote a story at my house." All of these children have historically had difficulty getting started with writing.

One area of writing where drama seems to have had less effect than I had anticipated was in understanding of beginning, middle, and end of story and of plot development. It is becoming apparent that the children who still write "bed-to-bed" stories or stories with no central conflict to be developed are the same children who are thoroughly satisfied with a dramatic scene which goes, to our adult minds, nowhere: a slice-of-life scene. I am coming to the conclusion that there is little point in working on this until children are ready. For me, this brings up questions about what people demand of stories in order to feel satisfied. Are the conventions of conflict and resolution learned from exposure to historically "correct" kinds of stories, or are they natural developmental progressions in writing? Whether understanding of plot structure is reached at a certain point of brain maturation or after a certain amount of exposure to the conventional story, I do not know.

But these are among the many questions to be investigated at a future time. Drama in the classroom opens new ways of thinking and new discoveries for teachers as well as for children. There are many areas in which to explore. Drama can be looked at as an adjunct to math, science and reading, as well as to writing. It is also possible to use drama as a tool for teaching respect for the self, for others, and for the environment. Our children have done some skits in which they work out conflict between themselves by taking the part of the other person. They have also given skits to the rest of the school to demonstrate safety rules or how to take care of the school. Both these strategies work for children and can be taken much farther. Drama can be used across the curriculum, both as a natural teaching tool and as a medium through which self-esteem and respect for others can be bolstered. I hope that drama in the classroom will be researched further in the coming years, for it is a natural, exciting, and simple aid to teaching.