

Developmental Drama in Education

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From prehistoric times to the present, drama has been an ongoing human activity. Eliminating barriers of time and space, drama helps people to capsulize the past, present and future, the then and now, into one and the same moment. Through dramatization of life's events, mankind can come to better understanding of existing problems and thereby construct a storehouse of wisdom with which to face new ones. In short, drama helps man to pre-experience life and to choose the person he will become.

Fortunately for children everywhere, the early twentieth-century interest in child welfare has resulted in an increased knowledge about child development and an awareness that the child needs to express his thoughts and feelings through legitimate channels. Consequently, educators are attempting to develop the child into a well-integrated being. No longer are we teaching just science or arithmetic or health; our concern is with relating these skills to the development of the whole child. *The Ontario Theatre Study* supports such totality: "One thing seems sure. Our educational systems must move and are moving from the stuffing of minds to the development of the whole person. In this development the creative arts are beginning to be recognized as powerful allies instead of a nuisance."

Children's drama is a creative art which can help develop human potential; furthermore, drama in education embraces every child of every ability—not just a talented few. Its foremost objective is the development of the integrated person through a variety of experiences pursued in a spirit of exploration and discovery. The process promotes recognition and acceptance of one's self while also leading to understanding and toleration of others—in all, a "know thyself" concept and a practising of the "art of life". Because it advocates this awareness of human consciousness and growth, such drama is referred to as developmental. In developmental drama the emphasis is on the process of individual development; in traditional theatre it is on the visible end result—a polished play.

Developmental drama serves to encourage a sense of self-worth, to promote growth of a positive self-concept, to release a sense of joy and confidence, and to foster the expression of individuality. It presents opportunities for increasing sincerity, responsibility, concentration, relaxation, imagination, intuition, resourcefulness, humour and awareness. Frequent group work occurs so that each child can adapt to taking any place within a group, accepting the responsibilities of his position either as a leader or follower and making a positive contribution toward the harmony of group function. In social drama situations the participant can pre-experience or work through some current or potential problems in life. This encourages him to realize that life

is full of difficulties, and it builds the stamina and imagination with which to encounter, endure and overcome obstacles. It develops the courage required to face repeated failure and the patience to begin again. It awakens the inner motivation needed for rising to the challenge of coping with life and exposes him to that which is real and ageless in the human heritage.

Whether or not the child ever becomes involved in "theatre" in later life, developmental drama experiences will benefit his growth as a human being. Certainly, the child who seeks greater proficiency in the theatre arts will have some background in the fundamentals, but the child who becomes a doctor, a diplomat, a missionary or an astronaut will also be forwarded in the process of self-realization. The importance of this dramatic method of learning is cited by A.S. Neill in *Freedom, Not License*: "Childhood is not adulthood; childhood is playhood and no child ever gets enough play. When a child has played enough he will start to work and face difficulties, and do a good job even when it involves a lot of unpleasant work."

Developmental drama also nurtures the varying degrees of creative potential present in each child—each one has his own store of this creative ability and each one has the right to progress at his own speed or within the scope of his own potential. Unfortunately, as E. Paul Torrance in his book, *Guiding Creative Talent*, points out: "the creative child is not likely to be appreciated by his classroom teachers—and often may be disliked. There are tremendous pressures on him to conform in both school and community". By counterbalancing such a denigrating pressure, drama allows each participant to recognize, explore and develop his *uniqueness* in both personal and interpersonal affairs. The child's knowledge of his physical, emotional, spiritual, creative, social, sensory and intellectual faculties is expanded. It is the right of every being to develop a wholeness of self, all 100%: to "self-actualize", as Maslow says. It is the function of developmental drama to promote opportunities for such growth.

It is well known that the achievement of skill in any activity is usually in direct proportion to the amount of practice given that skill. Similarly, skill in the art of living one's life depends upon practice, yet often such training is inadvertently left to chance. Those aspects of education inherent in learning how to live with ourselves and with others are practised in developmental drama. As psycho-cybernetic scientists have taught us, the *dream* precedes the *reality*; drama constantly exercises the imagination, recognizing it as the source of the individual and group dreams. Imaginative projection of the film of one's life can promote the achievement of goals while simultaneously extending awareness of various aspects of the human being in various kinds of environment. When he becomes involved in a real or simulated situation, the individual is immersed in a matrix of diverse viewpoints and emerges with an empathetic knowledge of them. In this way, the participant has an opportunity to experience, to feel, to think, to walk in others' moccasins—to wear the mantle of life without fear of personal involvement. The learning mileage he gains from this opportunity is up to him alone.

Where do educators begin in facilitating this growth? If we were in a canoe in the middle of a lake—calm or stormy—we would trust our vehicle, its paddle, and our knowledge of how to navigate to bring us safely back to shore. Likewise, with drama as our vehicle in a classroom setting, our knowledge of how to use dramatic techniques effectively can help us towards our goal of assisting each child to develop his full human potential. To that end, let us examine some of the common human capabilities that we can reasonably expect to foster through providing developmental drama experiences for primary age children.

Sensory abilities and developments

The child's insatiable curiosity about his world brings him to the classroom having formed most of his conceptual base through sensory experiences. To perpetuate this curiosity should be a vital goal of educators, and drama can use this curiosity, through definite sensory exercises, to help increase sensitivity and sympathetic awareness. In tactile activities, the children can become consciously aware of temperature, texture and weight. Directed use of the auditory sense helps them to distinguish loudness, pitch, distance, direction and musical qualities. Through visual exercises they can differentiate light, darkness, form, distance and colour. Exercises which call upon their sense of smell can help them isolate the odourless, as well as identify and name such qualities as sweetness, pungency, and other disgusting, peculiar, close, distant, strong and weak odours. Children can become more aware of the alliance of taste with smell and of the temperature, flavour, weight and texture of a variety of foods. Their sense of beauty, humour, duty, honour, gratitude, locality, morality, and the ridiculous can develop further through exposure to relevant examples. Their love of sound can expand in many directions—towards music, towards dramatic movement or dance, towards speech or language flow, or towards appreciation of poetry and literature.

Physical abilities and developments

Indoors, primary children frequently appear inhibited and afraid of space as is shown by their tendency to hug walls or cluster together in one spot within the security of a group. Providing free movement and relaxation allows the children to express themselves as freely as they do out of doors. They can be led into a spatial consciousness that frees them to enjoy the territory around them, to be able to use all the space available, and to balance their use of such space through equal sharing. Activities to explore time, weight, shape, direction and stillness—through the use of rostra blocks for exploration of levels—can facilitate the release of inhibitions. Their development of a kinaesthetic perception of shape and distance leads to grouping characterized by sharing and co-operating within a defined space. Much of this group play forms the democratic shape of a circle—their way of demonstrating equality with peers. The physical confidence gained through movement leads to emotional growth—control and co-ordination both being products of a constructive channelling of energy.

Communicative abilities and developments

Depending on their pre-school background, primary children may or may not be able to express themselves well verbally. If they have been raised in an environment where children are considered inferior beings, they will almost certainly be reluctant to speak. If they have been encouraged to express themselves, they will arrive at school with a vital, free form of expression. Prerequisite to the child's development of communicative skills is his belief that adults accept the existence of his point of view and his right to express that view. Repeated opportunities for speaking at the peer level can help children to develop confidence both in the worth of their own ideas and in their ability to express those ideas. (Only after this confidence and clarity exist unshakably in each child should any detailed concentration on the mechanics of speech be given.) A love of words and a joy in their musical flow develop in the primary child as a natural outcome of his increasing acceptance of himself, others and life itself. Drama offers a wealth of experiences for both verbal and non-verbal expression.

Creative abilities and developments

All primary children are creative when they first come to school and, as child drama authority Peter Slade has observed, most of their learning has been acquired through play. At this stage they enter freely into both projected and personal play. Unfortunately, because the classroom emphasis is usually on convergent thinking and conformity, divergent thinking and uniqueness may be severely repressed, lie dormant, or even be punished. Consequently, educators should take pains to encourage creative ability. Drama is one way to offer a balance of both cognitive and affective learning. Developmental drama is, in essence, creative problem-solving. Through both projected and personal play experiences, children can become more aware of problems and the many ways of solving them—ways which simultaneously involve the child's imagination, spontaneity and resourcefulness.

Emotional abilities and developments

Generally speaking, the primary child has not yet come to terms with his emotional make-up. He has yet to learn that he *chooses* his behaviour. Cathartic drama offers him a chance to regurgitate that which is disagreeable or incomprehensible within his environment. Subconsciously he is releasing the emotional impact of problem areas—murders, death, wars, home strife—and thus through selection and elimination furthers the process of choosing the person he wants to be. Here, perhaps more than any other discipline, drama can facilitate the discovery, balancing and mature control of the emotions. Through knowing how he himself responds, the child can begin to understand the feelings of other people and the reasons for their actions and reactions. He can legally and safely explore the same situation from another's viewpoint, thus gaining an empathy difficult to achieve in any other way.

Many teachers are shocked and may feel it is improper or immoral that children know about—much less act out—situations involving drugs, sex, alcohol, or violence. Yet children's play is a reasonably accurate reflection of problems they have encountered. The questions or problems for which they are seeking answers and understanding must be of concern to them; otherwise, they would not waste valuable playtime dramatizing these problems. The wise teacher lets this outpouring happen and learns from it how children perceive the real world. Where she can, she may wish to create play experiences that counterbalance disturbing ones. In this way the children can be assisted in their quest for understanding through their teacher's experiences.

Mental abilities and developments

Children are as intelligent as adults; they have merely had less time to develop their judgmental and intellectual capacities. Dramatic exercises can help extend the width, depth, flexibility and fluency of their thought. These exercises can extend concentration, can strengthen observation and memory, can utilize judgement, reason and reflection, and can lead those ready for it to abstract ideas. Children grow in depth as they come to comprehend experiences. Through drama, children can begin developing that sympathetic interplay between intellect and emotions which characterizes maturity.

Social abilities and developments

As Winnifred Ward indicates in *Playmaking with Children*, "In order to live successfully with other human beings we must understand them; and the wider, deeper, and more sympathetic our understanding is, the richer will be our own life. . . . It requires sensitivity to make one aware of what another is thinking and feeling by the way he looks and speaks and acts, and it necessitates imagination to interpret the meanings of these outward expressions of inner feelings."

The egocentric nature of the six or seven year-old is evident as he acts out from within his own territory. The ability to share, to think of others, to respect other people's rights is not inborn in any child. It is learned through example, through guidance and by interaction with other people. Without this aid, physical and emotional clashes can result when a child's territory overlaps with someone else's. Unless practice in inter-relating occurs, that struggle can continue throughout life. The sharing of experiences in drama can increase maturity, can strengthen the foundations for considerate behaviour, and can ignite the desire to participate and co-operate in a group. Besides developing awareness of others, social exercises allow children to practice communicating verbally as well as nonverbally. Through sharing deeply-moving moments together, children can develop a responsible awareness of others, can ascertain their place in the group, and can emerge with greater poise and self-confidence. The egocentricity begins to expand too, when the appearance of gangs proves that personal territories can integrate harmoniously. Progressing in drama from individual activity to roles as part of a cast can help children to develop their ability to share—to give and take—and to feel a sensitivity, harmony and

intuitive empathy with the whole group.

Spiritual abilities and developments

The primary child lives by a simple faith. For him, the fantasy and the real world overlap and intermingle. His power of belief is strong. Geraldine Siks, in *Creative Dramatics*, cites the importance of this aspect: "The spiritual side of the individual is, in essence, his personality. It is the quality which gives him distinction and sensitivity. Because adults do not readily recognize the spiritual needs of a child, they have, in far too many instances, neglected its development. A child's spirit is intangible as love is intangible. It has been spoken of as a gift or talent, as imagination, as a poetic attitude. It has been referred to as a child's bent, his knack, his aptitude, his potential, and his self. It is the spirit of a child which gives him identity."

Drama has shown that children can learn to distinguish between the base characteristics of fear, cruelty, materialism, cynicism, slander, infidelity, theft, lust, sloth, greed, arrogance and hate and the exemplary characteristics of integrity, joy, kindness, peace, nobility, fidelity, charity, truth, service, faith, humility and insight. Through experiences in silence they can discover inner peace. In describing the Montessori silence exercises, Orem claims that this quality is never ". . . taught externally for the sake of beauty or regard for the world, but is born of the pleasure felt by the spirit in immobility and silence. The soul of the child wishes to free itself from the irksomeness of sounds that are too loud, from obstacles to its peace during work. These children, with the grace of pages to a noble lord, are serving their spirits." In all, they are extending that quality they so often lose amidst layers of materialism—intuition.

The rate of development of each one of these areas will entirely depend on each child and his teacher. To force such growth or to start with very complicated demands is to expect too much too soon of the child. Progress evolves from successful accomplishment of one task at a time. Advancing from the simple and easy-to-accomplish activities to more challenging and complicated ones is a certain way to build confidence quickly and to influence the child for future quality experiences. It is not how much is done but how well it is done—quality rather than quantity. Only when absorption is constantly deep can the children safely be moved on to the next challenge. Here is where the teacher's own intuition makes the decision. If that decision is taken too soon, one should regress to that point where the children are capable of optimum effort and then move them on to something more difficult.

Developmental drama can act as the instrument whereby each child can pursue the never-ending process of developing his personality—his self as a human being. Through sensory-motor experiences, he can expand his mental, emotional, social, creative, communicative and spiritual qualities. Each of these must be exposed to release, control, extension and flexibility. The process can help the child to determine who he is in himself and in relation to others. He must accept his uniqueness and try to use his abilities to best advantage. In his

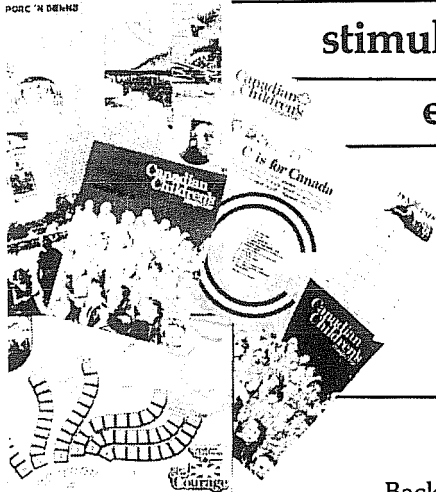
“doing” and “being” in all of life, he is realizing the command: “Be the best of whatever you are.”

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