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THE PLAY IS NOT THE THING . . . PRACTICAL DRAMA  
IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

In the past, attempts to define drama in education have resulted in divided schools of thought and there has been a tendency for teachers to accept one point of view and exclude the others. From these schools of thought have emerged four main approaches to drama. The first two have resulted from a division between drama and theatre. Drama in this context is seen as personal experience through which the child uses his own resources in the creation of situations, characters and dialogue. It is essentially a creative experience without the requirement of communication to others. Theatre, on the other hand, is essentially an interpretative experience involving communication with an audience. In this experience what has been created by others is brought to life. To me this dichotomy is a false one because the elements of each can appear in both forms of experience. First, what is created in drama can be shared with an audience, even though this sharing is not an essential part. Secondly, the experience of a scripted play can also be a creative one. Using the characters and situation of a scripted play, the children, through improvisation, can bring the play to life in a way that is more meaningful to them and more spontaneous. Thirdly, many of the elements of theatre — characterisation, interaction of characters through dialogue and movement, grouping of characters, enactment of conflict, unfolding of plot, establishment of setting and shaping of experience into a communicative form — appear in the drama. When children are deeply involved in their drama, theatre is also present. An excellent example from the adult world in which drama and theatre combine is Peter Brook's *The Ik*, a theatrical presentation which grew from a creative improvisation by the players involved.

The other two approaches have emerged as a result of the distinction between drama, an art form, and drama, a method of teaching. The former considers drama as a means by which the child can give shape to his real and imaginative feelings. Teachers professing this viewpoint see drama as a special activity with a special allotment on the timetable. The latter regards drama as a means by which a child can gain a greater understanding of the various subjects of the curriculum. In this case drama requires no special allotment on the timetable but can occur within any subject. Thus, when a child is learning about other countries, the teacher provides

opportunities for the child to enact being the people living in these countries. Here again the dichotomy is not justified. In drama as an art form the emphasis is on the shaping of the experience while in the drama as a teaching method emphasis is placed on the content that feeds the dramatic experience. Within both forms of drama there is at work the same fundamental process — a process of coming to know more about oneself and the world of which one is a part. Other subjects will often provide opportunities for the child to come to know and understand himself more. If the enactment of a feudal village, for example, the child might find himself in a situation of dominance or subservience and he then has the opportunity to explore and test his own feelings in that situation. The value of drama as an art form lies not only in the end product or presentation but in the whole process involved in giving expression to thoughts and feelings.

These four approaches to drama in education — personal experience, theatre, art form, teaching method — do not in themselves provide an adequate and all-embracing definition of drama. What they do is to show what some of the outcomes and functions of drama can be. A definition of drama must be a more global one that takes account for all four approaches. In this context drama is a process through which the child can be led to a deeper understanding of himself and the world in which he lives. The context for this process is the whole world of experience — personal experiences, the other subjects of the curriculum, the world of literature, and other forms of the mass media. Because of its creative nature, drama is also an aesthetic experience which, when expressed through the action of movement and language, is given a shape and thus becomes an art form and a new world is created. It is also an experience which, at certain stages of development, can be shared with others.

In the primary school in the early years certainly, dramatic activities should centre on personal, creative experiences. In recent years I have been examining the form that drama should take in the primary school, particularly in the lower grades. From my research into the theoretical basis of drama and practical experience in teaching young children, it has become clear that in the early years drama should centre on personal, creative experiences. The young child needs time to discover and master his own resources and to develop a sensitive awareness of his own environment and the people in it before he is required to enact what others have created. The play may have been the thing wherein to catch the conscience of King Claudius, but it is not the thing wherein to help young children catch the essence of drama. This may seem a contradiction, but from my work with young children it is clear that the play — the scripted play — and the young child are very far apart. The introduction of the scripted

play should come about by a very gradual process. Some children may never reach the stage where they are capable of interpreting a scripted play effectively. This is so with many adults. The enactment of a scripted play places heavy demands on the actor — reading ability, a good memory, highly developed voice and speaking skills, dextrous movement, perfect timing, keen insights into human behaviour, concentration and absorption, imagination, interpretative skills, a wealth of experiences as a point of reference, and sensitive awareness of an audience. These demands are beyond very young children, just as they are beyond many adults. This is not to deny that some young children are capable of performing to an audience, but drama in education must involve all the children.

Unfortunately, all too often, children's enactments of scripted plays lack spontaneity and naturalness. The child actors, having memorised their lines, deliver them in a stilted fashion, lacking any great depth of feeling and understanding of their import. The lines are not their own, but a mimicry of the producer, who has provided the model to copy. In some instances, the situation may be too far removed from the actors' world of experience. Also, all too often, the more able children "get the parts," while the less able miss out completely or have to be content with non-speaking parts as members of the crowd or inanimate parts of the scenery.

The most disturbing aspect of the scripted play for young children is that it does not provide full dramatic scope for all children. Every young child, unless he is hindered by a severe mental or physical handicap, has the potential to perform effectively in dramatic activities with a high degree of sensitivity, absorption, and imaginative skill. Indeed, drama comes into the classroom with every young child. One has only to observe a child deeply engrossed in imaginative play as mother caring for her baby or father mending the car. The child plays out this imaginary world with such a deep involvement that must be the envy of many an actor. How does he achieve this? In these play situations, he is not enacting fully the role of the other person, but he is for a brief moment in time "stepping into the other person's shoes." He does not "become" the other person, but is himself finding out what it would be like to be someone else. Drama for the young child must therefore start where the child is. At first he must have many opportunities to be himself in other situations, thus finding out more about himself and his world of experience, before he takes on the role of other people. His whole world of experience has to increase. Later he should be given opportunities to create other roles, situations, and dialogue for himself, so that his interest and absorption are maintained, before he is required to interpret those created by others, as in the scripted play. These creative experiences can be of far greater educational

benefit in these early years than the scripted play.

Last year I worked regularly with a class of thirty Grade 2 children in a Townsville Infants School. Relating the drama lessons to what they were learning about in other areas of the curriculum, the children were given a series of activities in which they were themselves discovering what it would be like to be other people in other places and times. So the classroom became various places — a fire station, an early Australian farm, another planet, the prince's castle, and so on. At first the activities were very much directed by me, but gradually, as the children became more deeply involved in the drama and believed for the moment that what was happening was real, they began to shape the activities themselves and direct the course of the action. In these activities where there was no audience or any suggestion of a performance the children developed their natural ability to make-believe. In a short time they were able to become completely absorbed in the activities. They enacted the drama with the naturalness and immediacy of a real-life situation. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of their work was the free flow of language — not idle talk, but language to maintain their make-believe world. Even the children who at first were very shy and reluctant to contribute, by the end of the programme had gained more confidence and were completely involved in the work. The reason for this free flow of language seems to rest in the fact that the dramatic situation provided the right context for stimulating language from these children, even the less verbally gifted. Demands were placed on them by the dramatic situation and they began to feel free to contribute without being self-conscious or worried about whether it was right or wrong.

It was decided that this class would put on a play for the breaking-up concert. This was the first time that they were to have an audience, apart from a few occasions on which I used the class for demonstration lessons. My main objective was to try to maintain throughout the preparation time the same naturalness and spontaneity that the children displayed in their drama lessons. The play was based on the story of *The Pedlar and His Caps*. The story tells of a pedlar who made lots of caps and then travelled about the neighbouring villages trying to sell them. He was unsuccessful and, after a long hot journey, he sat down to rest under a tree and soon fell asleep. While he was asleep, some monkeys stole his caps and climbed to the top of the tree amidst much noisy chattering. The noise soon woke the pedlar who was very annoyed to find his caps missing. After many attempts to retrieve his caps, he finally realised that the monkeys were imitating his movements and speech. He threw his own cap to the ground and the monkeys returned his caps.

As a whole class the children were given many situations relevant

to the story. They became pedlars and decided on all sorts of wares to make and sell. They mimed doing these. Then they became villagers and decided what they would be — bakers, farmers, cake makers, doll-makers, dressmakers, mayors, carpenters and so on. They set up their imaginary homes and shops and became involved in the routine work of the day. They decided on their reasons for not buying caps from the pedlar. Then as a whole class they became monkeys. Finally the sequence of the story was considered. By this time the events were clearly understood. Throughout the activities language flowed freely because the children were unhampered by having to remember the lines and spontaneity was evident.

The next step was the casting of the various parts. This caused no problems. A number of children were monkeys, others were people in the village, and the pedlar himself had an assistant to travel about with him. No one was disappointed and they knew what the part demanded because they had explored them all in the earlier activities. No lines of dialogue were written down. The children created these themselves. They varied slightly from one practice to the next until they became well established. No special time was devoted to memorising the lines. They *did not have* to be learnt.

The main difference between this performance and the normal drama lessons was that children had to become aware of an audience. They had to remember to make their voices loud enough, arrange the furniture and scenery with the audience in mind, and consider their costumes. The monkey masks were made during an art lesson. The children also had to repeat their activities several times, which did not happen very often in other drama lessons.

On the day of the performance, the children performed their play with confidence and feeling. No one forgot lines nor was the sequence of the play interrupted. They communicated effectively to their audience and this was no small feat for a cast of thirty. There was a freshness about their performance as though this was the first time it had happened.

Although performance is not the ultimate aim of most drama lessons, each activity could be shaped towards this end, whether the source of the dramatic activity comes from everyday situations, make-believe situations, or from the world of literature, film, radio or television. Indeed the source of the drama could be a scripted play. The children could then take the story line and create a play of their own. Older children could go a step further and return to the original scripted play, which they should then be able to interpret more effectively, having come to an understanding of it by creative experience of the situation and characters.

Thus we see that, in this approach to drama, the scripted play is placed at the end of the process. The children I have described could have

then written a script based on what had been enacted during their performance.

No, the scripted play is not the thing to be used as the starting point for drama with young children. If the scripted play is approached gradually, children, by the time they enter high school, should have developed the skills necessary to interpret plays with greater sensitivity and awareness. They may not become actors or directors, but they will certainly become more appreciative audiences of the future.

