

A Time and A Place

Developing Improvised Drama in the Primary School

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Primary Education

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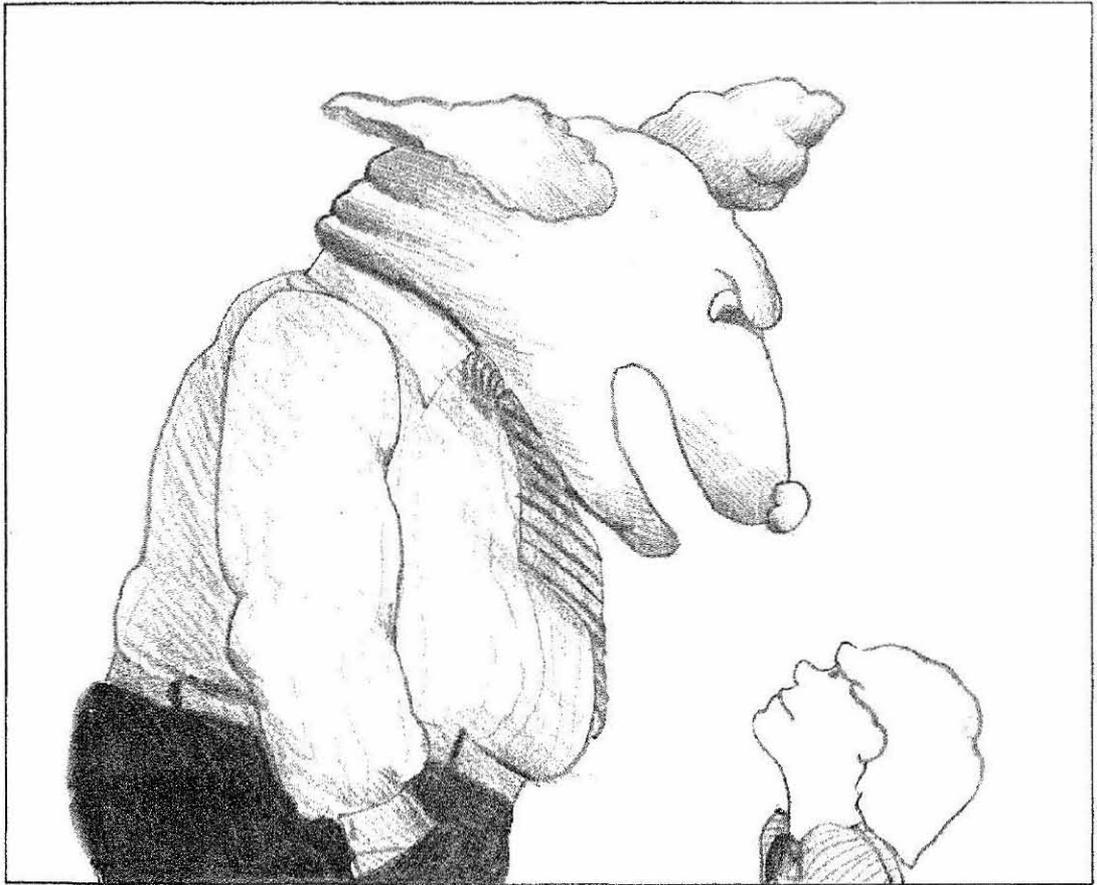
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Group play-making...what it is...
the role of the teacher and some useful tools



What is group play-making?

Basically group play-making or improvisation, is a play without a script, which the children may invent, with or without the teacher's help in the classroom.

Such a play does not require any form of skill or ability at reading nor of learning or remembering lines; it is a universal activity that children everywhere can enjoy and master. Natural group play already exists in its more violent state in the playground, and on street corners where a group or gang of children meet together and formulate their ideas.

This gang play begins to come into being at about six years of age, when natural group leaders begin to emerge from within the infant grades. Natural alliances begin to form around these leaders, and however fleeting these groupings may appear to the adult, they are the beginnings of the child's socialisation beyond his own ego. The situations they invent within natural play, range from stark reality to truly imaginative fantasy. The children freely elect the characters they wish to be — with invented situations to fit the bill.

They will often play out disjointed (to adult eyes) pieces of play which will include those situations which they are attempting to comprehend, in their eternal struggle to

understand adult behaviour and the part the child takes in governing that behaviour.

Unlike many adults, the child finds great difficulty in distinguishing between fantasy and reality. Often the everyday events in a child's life may be represented by symbols in his dramatic play e.g. a bad tempered father may be symbolised as a dangerous animal, even though the child is not consciously aware of the substitution. This partly explains why this aspect of the child's development is an unconscious one. On the surface the child may appear to play out situations, or play roles, without any apparent motive.

The children struggle in their play-making to take on a nebula of roles. They may be father, mother, sister, policeman, or any number of things or objects which appear in their lives demanding a place.

Placing these characters in relation to himself is a very difficult task for the child. He is constantly assessing and re-assessing his own place within the group.

How can we help as sympathetic adults and teachers?

Perhaps the greater part of the teacher's role, as

explained more fully later, is in the nurturing of the group play, enriching the child's experience with various stimuli. Perhaps more importantly, we need to guide the children from the point we judge them to be in life. We need to lead them towards a fuller understanding of themselves and other people.

Guided group play reaps the child many rewards, through language development; in flow, clarity and sheer appreciation for the love of words. Through improvisation in the classroom led by the teacher, the child takes a journey from the oneness of his own ego (where he dominates the toys he plays with) to the complex social structures of, 'give and take', in gang play.

A great many natural skills are involved in the child's creative improvisation. It is the teacher's role as a catalyst, which transforms the crude gang play into a more constructive creative opportunity, in which discovered experiences of living are proffered and shared.

The teacher needs to recognise and utilise the living skills, which may be developed through the child within the group and help by adding quality to the group work.

The overall aims at developing the child and his personality, through group improvisation, are those of absorption and sincerity.

The absorption comes through the concentration involved in playing a character and the sincerity comes from playing it out with utter honesty.

Looking at what is there

Looking at children is of great importance, if we are not to waste a great deal of valuable time. It is only by looking, that we are able to have a clearer indication of the child's understanding of life, and consequently, have some idea of where to begin helping the child.

Language flow¹

When the children are well into their guided group play, they naturally develop their own language. They invent words which have meanings only significant to the group. A certain amount of language flow is achieved in the frequent opportunities at playing out situations. However, the teacher does need to be constantly looking for moments to enrich their efforts.

The child needs to enjoy a frequent out-flowing of ideas, orally as well as written. Before writing with any flow, children need to speak freely and so internalise that flow in the mind first. It is often a good idea to begin by setting the children an initial drama activity (there are many mentioned later) and by careful observation, assess the activity.

By looking, assess each individual child as far as possible in their abilities: to play, to be

¹Peter Slade, *Child Drama* (London, 1958).

friendly, to be articulate, to pick up new words, to use appropriate words with meaning, to speak with clarity, to listen with attention and to move with firm physical control. With these observations in mind, the teacher charts her course accordingly, with clear purpose in her lesson planning. Ideas are selected more effectively.

The role of the teacher/guide, is to take what the child has to offer and add to it, accepting the child's contribution without criticism. Gradually, the responsibility for selecting and organising group ideas is handed from the teacher to the group, in order to foster their own group creations. Often, they will welcome the relief of using the teacher's ideas — having had many opportunities for playing out their own. Such ideas need to have purpose — so if Peter cannot speak clearly, utilise a situation in the group play where Peter needs to speak with greater clarity e.g. shouting his orders as Captain of the ship. This is an unconscious solution for Peter, where he is not made fully conscious of his faltering speech — therefore, not becoming self-conscious.

It is no coincidence, that many self-conscious children, have in the past, been coerced into showing their drama efforts too early, before full absorption has been developed. (The consequences of showing and sharing are outlined in greater detail in 'General considerations'.)

Demonstrating

It is important that the teacher, in stimulating group play-making, should tell the children, 'what' to do, not 'how' to do an activity. This important factor will allow the child to carry out the activity in his or her own personal way, thus preserving individual approaches to work. This is far better than the teacher attempting to demonstrate, because then the lesson deteriorates into adult drama for which teachers are not usually equipped. At best, the children will copy a poor model, at worst their own creative out-flow will cease and spontaneity will end. Teachers have said, in defence of lesson demonstration, that they have done it in order to help those children who do not know what to do, or have tried to help the child show the 'correct' response — whatever that might be. With respect, if the child does not know what to do, then we need to look more critically at both the aims and the guidance we have given, with the possibility that the work and approach might be inappropriate to the child.

The 'right' atmosphere

The teacher should not only be a guide, but aim to set up a warm friendly atmosphere. In other aspects of learning we often hear teachers speak of, 'creating the right atmosphere', it is no less so with drama. The teacher is not a parent, but nevertheless should attempt to foster the same

confident family situation found in many homes. Once a happy framework is established, the children become more trusting as a consequence, situations and characters meaningful to the child, will emerge.

More attention is given to discipline under the section, 'General Considerations', but it is most important that an understanding of rules and discipline, with a purpose, is understood by the child as soon as possible.

Only through understanding the discipline, does the child come to know the set 'norm' of behaviour. If the teacher is inconsistent in dealing with social disputes, the children will soon become confused and a great deal of ill-feeling may arise, eroding social relationships.

Any teacher, with a spark of humanity, can teach drama, you do not have to be a drama specialist. The important factor is coming to know children and to grow alongside their ideas. Anyone can develop drama — the teacher's task is a harder one — that of developing children.

Developing each individual may seem an awesome task, to help us we are able to make use of a few 'tools', a few known to us already, some which we may have taken for granted before.

Some useful tools

The voice

This is the most important of the teacher's aids.

If used wisely, it seldom breaks down and usually requires little maintenance. The teacher's voice can literally, make or break a lesson. As with commercial music it can also create mood and atmosphere. It is sad that many teachers use their voices solely to create harsh, shrill notes, which are often fired in quick succession. There is genuine magic in a voice used softly, at the right moment, perhaps used in guiding the children through some personal exploration. A soft voice should not be the prerogative of a female teacher, such a voice ought to be the repertoire of every teacher, bringing peace to the children's lives, giving quiet absorption. In many instances, when the teacher raises her voice too loudly, the general noise-level of the children will be raised too, often both in competition to each other.

The voice's other main role, is that of giving positive commands and firm direction. There is a danger in talking far too long, or giving vague directions. Instructions need to be short and fully explanatory e.g. 'Now you are' or 'And then you meet' and 'Begin now' and later, 'Stop'. All mean something and are not apologies lasting an eternity... 'and now I think we might er er...'. The children need to feel secure in the knowledge that the teacher knows what she is doing.

The teacher needs to watch the children and develop the flow of the story as necessary. The voice may be used wisely in conjunction with music or percussion. As the music decreases in sound, the volume of the voice can be raised, to give further direction to the flow of play. This

idea will help a smooth flow to the lesson, avoiding the jarring caused by abrupt stops and starts. The voice needs to be used in all its colourful forms. It can make for an abundant source of musical sounds to fit the situation at hand, whether peaceful, or mysterious etc., by adding depth and colour, the whole lesson is enhanced. (This does not only apply in drama.)

I recently attended a meeting, where teachers showed great concern about the apparent decline in a child's ability to listen. Most teachers present, spoke with unfaltering, monotonous voices, without apparent pause. Is it really surprising that the children they taught did not bother to listen?

We can provide many excuses why children appear to 'turn off' . . . the effects of television . . . they live noise filled lives within noisy environments and no doubt many more. Even when all the arguments have been put forward, I still hold that, a teacher's boring voice has a lot to answer for in encouraging children to insulate themselves against monotony.

The brain is a remarkable, living machine, capable of eliminating background noise and helping us to listen to one particular sound. If the teacher's voice only contributes to background noise, it is no surprise that it is cut out.

The cymbal

This is a useful addition to the teacher's 'tool-box'. When suspended by its strap and

struck with a small hammer, the resultant note resounds around the room, until it slowly fades away. So, it is an ideal instrument for continuous action, flowing from one activity to another. The sound also suggests slow change, in a controlled manner e.g. changing from something small to something much bigger, or vice-versa.

Within group play, it may be used to 'fade' from one scene to another, or one part of the action to another.

Its sound may be used for ceremonial occasions, or sacrificial dances, enhancing majestic entrances and executions, in fact, any action that 'unfolds itself'.

It may be used as a further aid to control by 'topping' the children's sound, when for example, everyone is speaking at once in a language activity. The teacher's instrumental sound makes a larger noise than the children's sound and therefore can be heard by everybody. As the cymbal sound fades, the children's sound fades with it — a common agreed signal.

The tambour

This is an ideal instrument for making quick sharp notes. If the skin is loosened, a more resonant note can be made. Struck slowly, its sound suggests mysterious activity e.g. exploring strange places.

When the tambour is hit more rapidly, it can speed up the whole playing-out, as for example, in a chase scene. Struck slowly, the whole action

can be slowed down, as with planetary exploration in slow motion.

It is particularly ideal for use with younger children, since the sound appeals naturally to their own enjoyment of time-beat.

Many of the sounds of the tambour may be incorporated into story building, since it is this early love of sound that ultimately leads to the love of speech.

As with the cymbal, it may be used as a control, to begin or end an activity, or as an agreed signal for some conflict within a situation, for example an explosion.

The tambourine

A good, inexpensive compromise, between the cymbal, (a continuous sound) and the tambour (sharp sound), engaging both qualities. When purchasing a tambourine, it is advisable to avoid poor quality plastic coverings and buy well-made, skin covers, which will not crack easily at room temperature. The tambourine possesses other variations of sound — another aid to imaginative interpretation.

Record player

It may seem odd to include a section on how to use an item which has had a place in our western society for many years.

The record player, needs to be used with

sensitivity. All too often, teachers will lift the stylus from a disc far too abruptly, jerking not only the music, but also the children's concentration. Subtle control is needed when taking up, or bringing down the volume of sound, at the beginning, middle, or end of the musical passage, assisting a logical, smooth flow and subsequent de-climax, if necessary. See later for detail of de-climax.

Record music

Every teacher should try to obtain a good and varied collection of music on record. The teacher needs to know exactly where a particular track may be found and where the mood might change on that track e.g. from loud to soft etc., and so be able to utilise it immediately, as the situation arises.

Relevant music should contain simple climaxes of sound, plenty of contrast in tempo, mood and atmosphere, ideal for both movement and playmaking. Above all else, it needs to appeal imaginatively to the children's pictorial listening.

It has been discovered, through Peter Slade's practical observation, that children tend to listen to music emotionally, not intellectually. See 'Suggestions for further reading'.

A great deal of classical and modern music may simply appear as a conglomeration of disjointed sounds to the child's ears. The choice of music, for children of all ages, has to be a

careful one. In the child's imaginative listening do not expect them to see the images intended by the composer, or those that you, the teacher, might pre-suppose.

Choose music with strength, vitality, or calming qualities, preferably with all varieties on the same record.

Although specific sounds e.g. jungle drums, may be part of the teacher's collection, it is wiser to have a variety of music, open to much wider interpretation. A list of appropriate music, with some suggestions, may be found in the section, 'Ways to stimulate the children's ideas'.

De-climax¹

This is a teacher-induced part of the 'tool-box'. De-climax, is a 'bringing down' of the children's sound level, usually towards the end of a lesson. The children are calmed down, by the gradual slowing down in pace of the children's movement and sound, by the teacher, until everything is brought to a quiet, gentle, stop.

Very often, the decrease in the volume of music, or sound, will act as an agreed signal, once the children's own sound has been 'topped'. This de-climax helps the children, physically and emotionally, to be prepared for less active lessons which may follow. It is only fair to the

children that they are not left, 'up in the air' and so be criticised for previous excitement, induced by the teacher.

It is a good exercise in social awareness to realise, that other staff or parents are not going to welcome over excited children.

Having looked at some of the 'tools' at our disposal, I would like to examine some general considerations to be taken into account when planning a drama session. They are in no particular order, since all are equally valid.

¹ Phyllis Lutley, *Teaching with a Purpose*. Pamphlet available from: The Educational Drama Association, Rea Street South, Derritend, Birmingham U.K.