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In and out of roles, stories and buckets!

Drama is within the English curriculum from ages 4 – 14 and this has had an enormous impact on the way drama is taught and the way it has developed in schools as a tool for the teaching of literacy. With the advent of "Excellence and Enjoyment" schools are feeling more empowered to cross curricular boundaries, return to topic and thematic curriculum approaches and explore a range of teaching approaches, including using drama more as a teaching and learning medium.

Using whole class drama across the curriculum as a methodology and pedagogy makes perfect sense. We have only to look at what young children who are developing normally are doing before they come to school to understand that make believe is important to them and important to learning. Children who are not developing normally find imagining and pretending difficult. As adults, don't we sometimes pretend, rehearse, imagine situations in order to either help us engage or feel confident about a forthcoming event, or to come to terms with an event that has already happened? When we go on job interviews, we may imagine ourselves already in the job, practice talking to an imaginary interviewer, dress as if we have the job already, rehearse a speech as we are driving etc. All this links to rehearsing success and in an imaginary world we can experience and practice being successful. In drama lessons we help children to do the same. They can become anyone, anywhere, at anytime in anyplace. Drama is infinitely flexible !

When children come to school we need to continue to enable and support role play and move it beyond role play areas into a social, collective, whole class drama experience that supports the whole child and every child. Drama enables and supports social, personal, emotional, cultural, spiritual, physical and creative development as well as cognitive development. Just as an empathetic adult, parent or carer joins in alongside a young child's pretend play before they start school, a class teacher and/or teaching assistant can become a co-participant in a whole class "pretend" with a learning agenda for the children in mind. This needs to have a structure to be manageable and so will involve using drama strategies and conventions to support and structure the collective fiction. Gradually children become increasingly able to use their existing dramatic play skills (which are drama skills) to make and communicate in increasingly aesthetic ways through whole class drama.

The following lesson is for a whole class and is a stepping stone on the path from dramatic play to drama. It is most suitable for 5 – 6 year olds and uses a delightful picture book as the initial

stimulus, "Billy's Bucket" by Kes Gray and Garry Parsons. The drama invites the children to actively enter the story-world contained within the book and do far more than just re-enact it. The children are invited to enter a story-world and then creatively make it their own. Ideally, the teacher stays alert to what the children are making up within the drama, listening carefully to what they say and watching carefully what they do and deciding what they have offered that may be profitable to pick up and focus on, develop further and can link to the learning agenda. Inexperienced teachers of whole class drama will understandably stick to a safe lesson plan and over time more bravely move with the children rather than the plan without losing sight of the learning.

I have used "Billy's Bucket" as the basis for drama lessons with many whole classes of children in Norfolk schools and the lesson is never the same twice as I use and build on what the children are offering and try to weave their ideas into the fiction e.g. during anti-bullying week in a Yarmouth First school a child when improvising with this story said she had met a mermaid who was being bullied by the Bully Fish. The Bully Fish idea came from a child and I used it immediately and afterwards in other schools. Through the drama, all the children were able to meet the mermaid the child had created (teacher in role as mermaid) and the children were able to work together and give the mermaid advice about how to deal with the bully-fish. Of course the advice was based on how they had been advised to handle bullying by their class teacher. What they said in the drama lesson was evidence that they understood what to do and could put it into action within a drama lesson and therefore maybe in the playground thereafter. The mermaid asked the children to show her what they were advising and they did so through small group playmaking, rehearsing successfully dealing assertively with bullies and activating bystanders.

Lesson outline

It is Billy's birthday and he wants a bucket. His parents try to persuade him to have something else.

1. **Teacher in role** as Billy. The class as Billy's parent/s (**collective role**) suggest various birthday presents to Billy and give persuasive reasons why each would be a good present. Teacher as Billy persists in wanting a bucket and politely deflects each of the "parents" suggestions.

Modelling writing/reading opportunity: The teacher can re-read this opening section of the book and seamlessly integrate the children's present suggestions alongside those in the book, as if they had been in the book to begin with. The children will then hear their ideas being used and modelled as text.

Billy and his parents go to "Buckets R Us.

2. **Guided Visualisation/ Speaking Objects/ Improvisation in pairs :** The children are asked to stand with eyes closed and imagine they are a bucket. Silently, with eyes still closed, they need to decide what are they made of. The teacher says, "Know what you are made of.... What is your handle like? How does it join the bucket?.... What will you be used for?.....What colour are you?.....Do you have any patterns or pictures on you?.... Are you smooth all over or not?You think you are the best bucket in the shop.....what would you say to Billy that would make him want to buy you?" Ask them to open their eyes and

turn to a partner. There will now be bucket brinkmanship! As two buckets the pairs have an improvised conversation, each trying to convince the other that they are the best bucket e.g. "I am a very strong bucket and will last a long time." "Yes but I am a very pretty bucket..." etc.

Writing opportunity: The descriptive speech could easily lead into descriptive writing about the bucket or each child could create an advertisement for their bucket, highlighting in writing the main selling points they have already decided and picture of the bucket they have visualised.

Billy's parents try to persuade a shop assistant to get a particular bucket down from a high shelf.

3. **Teacher in role** as shop assistant. The children in **collective role** as Billy's parents try to persuade a shop assistant with a secret fear of heights to climb a ladder to get the bucket Billy wants. The teacher makes excuses e.g. "This bucket is identical. I am not allowed to go up ladders etc. but in time will admit to fear of heights and the children will have to come up with a solution e.g. get another assistant, encourage the assistant up the ladder, ask to get it themselves etc. At last the bucket will be given to Billy. (The children may count each rung as the assistant climbs up and count backwards as she comes back down the ladder to offer a numeracy link and practice counting within a drama context.)

Billy fills his bucket with water and looks into it. He sees an underwater world.

4. Seated in a class circle the **teacher in role** as Billy, looks into the bucket and says, "Wow! I can see a rock pool with crabs in it and they are chasing each other..." and passes the bucket on. The children **working in role** as Billy are asked to look inside and each say one thing they can see in Billy's Bucket and to try to say one thing about it e.g. "I can see a shipwreck and its covered in seaweed." Try to get the children to add a bit of detail.
- 5.

Writing/mapping opportunity: This activity can be followed up by the children drawing and labelling an pictorial map of the underwater world they have jointly created. With a small group it could be done during the drama, mapping what they can see onto a group map in turn but would take too long with a whole class.

5. **Physical theatre/speaking objects:** Stand up in a big class circle. The inside of the circle is now the inside of Billy's Bucket. In turn several children are invited to enter the circle in turn and place themselves as objects that we know are in the bucket. Again they say a little about themselves, e.g. "I am the shipwreck. I sank in a very big storm a long time ago." The teacher will need to model this activity first. Gradually a physical representation of part of the underwater world will be created for all to see.

Writing/art opportunity: The children can write as the objects after the lesson or the lesson could be paused at this point for writing and resume later. They could draw the object and write on it in role, e.g. "I am a piece of slimy seaweed, shiny and green." Together they could be collaged to form a pictorial map with accompanying text...a "talking map"

- Ritual:** The children stand in a class circle and are told that they are all going to go inside the bucket to explore together under the water and that you will be coming with them. Tell them that you know that there are 3 things they all need to do together to get inside this underwater world safely but you can't remember what they are. Can they remember? Take 3 suggestions and rehearse them in sequence with them, to practice what they will be doing. Suggestions typically include, putting on a diving suit, holding hands in a circle and jumping in together. After a practice, carry it out "for real" and you will have arrived safely underwater!

Writing/art opportunity: You may ask the children later to storyboard the 3 things in sequence that are required to be done to get safely into the underwater world, so that you have a record of them for the next time you can't remember.

- Improvisation:** Before letting the children explore the underwater world individually or in pairs, agree a signal with them that means they return to stand with you, where you are e.g. holding up a shell or clapping an agreed rhythm. Then let them dramatic play being in the underwater world that they have already created before entering. They may explore things they know are there e.g. the shipwreck or they may discover new things e.g. a cave. This is a dramatic play type improvisation which should only last a few minutes before you call them back to you to hear what they have been doing and what they have discovered so far. After they have shared a little of what they have all been imagining they are doing, let them go off and explore again and this time they may join up with others to maybe show each other where they have already supposedly been.

Writing/art opportunity: There will have been many imaginary places visited, objects found and adventures had during the improvisation. They should tell them to each other and ask each other more about them before maybe writing them or storyboarding them.

- Teacher in role:** Ideally take on the role of someone or something created by a child and then try to give them a problem to solve together e.g. a mermaid who has lost her comb...a diver that is lost.....a fish that is fed up with having to stay with his brothers and sisters etc. This is where I used the child's idea of a bully fish and became a crying mermaid with a torn tale, hiding in a cave, too frightened to venture out in case I met the bully fish and asked the children for their help and advice. Create any role that suits what you want the children to focus on.

Writing opportunity : You can introduce a message in a bottle into the drama that you find and let the children write possible messages. Or you could produce half a torn message and ask them to complete it.

- Ritual:** Ask the children how you can get back out of the underwater world all together and safely. Often they reverse the "getting in" ritual or they might make up another 3 part ritual for "getting out" again. Carry out the ritual together to get safely back.
- Teacher in role:** In a class circle place the imaginary bucket in the centre and ask the children (your friends) to look after it for you (Billy) as your parents say you have to go to bed. Ask them to make sure that no-one touches your bucket as it clearly a special bucket and has living creatures in it. Then tell the children you will re-enter and will pretend this

time to be Billy's dad. As Billy's dad tell them you will borrow the bucket to wash your car while Billy is asleep. No doubt they will give you reasons you can't take it if you ask, "Why can't I borrow it?" You can repeat this as Billy's mum, who wants to borrow it to water the roses. Don't take the bucket yet as you don't want physical confrontation to develop.

While Billy is asleep his father borrows the bucket to wash his car.

- 11. Teacher narration/teacher in role:** Ask the children to close their eyes and say, "Eventually Billy's friends were so tired guarding the bucket that they fell asleep. In the morning they were woken up by Billy shouting..." Then become Billy again, "Oh no! My bucket has gone. Did you see anyone take it?" They are likely to recount the parents' attempts. You as Billy are suddenly startled as you look out of an imaginary window into the street. "Oh no! Look, there is a great big whale outside in the street."

Billy goes out to the street, where there is chaos caused by the arrival of the stranded whale. (If you have the picture book it would be a helpful visual stimulus before bringing the scene alive through drama. The lamppost is bent over, a car has shunted another, dogs are barking, Billy's dad is in shock, a man on a ladder drops what he is holding, a mother with a pushchair is frightened, neighbours watch from windows, dad's car is under the whale and we are told fire engines arrive.) This is the start of a whole new drama!

- 12. Tableau/ improvisation :** After you have talked about what is happening in the picture, tell them they are all going to be in the picture. One at a time a few children say who they want to be and get up and place themselves in the imaginary street scene, saying who they are and giving ideally a little information too, e.g. "I am the man at the top of the ladder and I have dropped my sponge." Once the first few children are in the still tableau ask the other children to wait and watch as the tableau comes to life. Then tell the rest that they will be going in a few at a time together as other people who arrive on the scene and everyone can make up what happens. Remind them that there is a dreadful problem to be solved here. The whale will die without sea water.

- 13. Teacher in role:** Tell the children that you will enter the scene as a reporter and ask them who they think you need to interview most of all. Then freeze the action and interview the people they suggest about what has happened. You may also decide to be a photographer and use a digital camera to capture the scene.

- 14. Still image/freeze frame:** In small groups of no more than 4 the children can turn themselves into a photo that appeared in a newspaper afterwards. Each group in turn stands very still as you photograph them (or pretend to).

Writing opportunity : The newspaper report can be created or just the headlines that could go with it. The digital photos can provide a prompt or the basis of a storyboard. The children can write short eye witness accounts to contribute to the report or sentences to go with the photographs.

15. **Group improvisation / storytelling / hotseating** : Tell the children that the problem of the whale in the street was solved. You don't know how but they do! Ask them to work in small groups and make up together how the problem was solved. Then all listen as each group in turn tells the others (or show the others) how it was solved e.g. "Well we managed to get a great big lorry and a crane....." or "We dug a big hole in the road and filled it with sea water....." Give opportunities for questioning each other's accounts and you as teacher join in questioning the children in role.
- 16.

Writing opportunity: This lends itself to recording alternative endings. This could be in the form of producing the "missing page" of the picture book, complete with art work . Cut paper to the same size as the picture book and ask the children to create the missing page that replaces the present last one (that says they pushed the whale back in the bucket eventually, with the help of 3 fire engines). Or you could just ask them to create individually or in pairs an alternative last sentence that could be spoken or written.

Within this lesson outline I have highlighted the writing opportunities mainly but of course the story has great cross curricular thematic potential for schools seeking to develop a creative curriculum approach.

For example:

Science: Why are different materials used for different types of bucket? Why does our voice echo differently in different buckets?

Design and Technology: Design and make a bucket that can hold water and test it.

Geography: Create the underwater world map.

PSHE: Is it alright to borrow something without the owner's permission if you gave it as a present?

Maths: How much will different buckets hold? How many different ways can you think of to find out?

Drama is motivating and engaging for children. It links feeling with learning and it can be a powerful vehicle for teaching across the curriculum, providing purposeful contexts for writing from experience, albeit imagined, both in and out of role. It gives opportunity for working co-operatively and encourages the sharing of ideas. It is also a powerful opportunity for teachers to integrate and model speaking and listening, reading and writing. This lesson is designed for children of around 5–6 years old but the drama approach and strategies are adaptable and suitable for children and students of any age. The roots of drama are in dramatic play and education needs to provide opportunity for developing role play and drama playfully and creatively for learning at every age.

References

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