

# **Drama approaches and techniques**

## Why use drama?

Most drama practitioners base their work in the idea of **authentic teaching and learning**. That is, they seek to provide opportunities for children to voice their opinions, express their feelings and make genuine choices. There are no right answers in a good drama session - children are encouraged to interpret, speculate, ask questions, wonder and say what they think and feel rather than providing a definitive 'correct' response. Working in this way can inspire curiosity and foster in children the desire to want to find out more, placing them at the centre of their learning.

Drama often makes use of **creative gaps** or areas of 'open-ness' that require the participants "*to construct meaning actively through imaginative engagement*" (**Joe Winston**). These spaces - where the story of the drama is open to interpretation or indeed needs to be created by participants - allow children to make meaning and create new dramatic content drawing on what they know and have experienced both from within the fiction and their own lives. This approach is supported by the asking of **open questions** (i.e. questions that have a range of responses, all of which can be accommodated into the fabric of the drama/task). Working in this way has an important role to play in validating and developing children's sense of self.

Drama is **collaborative and interactive**. The ability to work individually and collectively, to share understandings and to negotiate ideas and co-construct knowledge are important building blocks to later learning, and drama has an important role to play in developing these skills. Drama also provides rare opportunities for those whose emerging learning style is **kinaesthetic, spatial and interpersonal**.

Drama **uses a fictional frame to support and protect children**. The story of the drama may draw on real life issues and events and may involve children contributing from their own experiences with their own thoughts, feelings and ideas, but ultimately the experience can be framed as 'just pretending'. This allows children to encounter and overcome fears, articulate hopes and dreams and not to be limited by the constraints of 'real life'.

Working in role allows children to **imagine themselves differently** -to enter into new social spheres, to step into the shoes of someone else and see the world through new eyes. Such activities foster empathy and the ability to consider other points of view, supporting children's holistic emotional, personal and social growth.

**Drama is an accessible form**. The use of words, facial expressions, body language, puppets, mime, costumes and multi sensory props etc provide multiple pathways for children into a drama allowing them to make sense of what is happening and to determine the nature of the task. This is of particular importance when children are speakers of English as an Additional Language (EAL) or have special educational needs.

Drama is **closely aligned to play** providing structured and semi-structured opportunities for children to imagine, act out, decide on what happens next,

take control, negotiate with others, generate ideas, take turns, work in groups/individually, pretend to be someone else, be themselves, relate to others, develop narrative, lead and be creative. Drama work can stimulate new ideas for children's free play as well as drawing on the interests, fears and lives of children for inspiration.

**Drama employs different modes of communication:** moving between the roles of teacher, storytelling and character allows more opportunities for explaining, re-enforcing, recapping, repeating and paraphrasing to take place to support children's comprehension. Drama also supports children to communicate and develop language, encouraging the use of different social registers through interacting with a range of characters in a variety of social contexts using appropriate tone and vocabulary.

**Drama work provides opportunities to 'model' for children.** This can take place through the use of in-role work, 'thinking aloud', asking different types of questions; hearing language associated with a particular purpose; demonstrating action, behaviour and tasks.

## **Why use story?**

**Stories provide a shortcut to planning.** Someone else has done the hard work of creating compelling characters and situations for children to engage with. The job for teachers and Early Year's practitioners then becomes to decide which stories to work with, which parts of the story to access and how and for what purpose.

**Stories supply a need or impetus for learning from within the story.** Consequently empathy for a character, engagement with a dilemma or problem or the desire to progress to the next part of the story become the reason to communicate, take action or engage with a task.

**Children want to know what happens next:** This can further understanding of narrative structure and sequencing, allowing opportunities for prediction and reflection. If the story is compelling enough the desire to progress to the next narrative event will keep children engaged with the learning contained within the story.

**Stories contain human dilemmas and conflict which can be seen from different points of view:** This can aid lateral thinking and empathy and frame and motivate children to actively become involved

**Literacy skills can be explicit and practised from within the story:** Supporting tasks such as speaking and listening, emergent and persuasive writing both in and out of role, and using the teacher as scribe.

**Stories can be chosen as a metaphor for actual experience:** Allowing for the exploration of sensitive issues within a fictional frame, as well as supporting and encouraging children to contribute from their own understandings and perspectives

## Areas of learning and development connecting drama to the revised Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum

- **Communication and language** development involves giving children opportunities to experience a rich language environment; to develop their confidence and skills in expressing themselves; and to speak and listen in a range of situations.
- **Personal, social and emotional development** involves helping children to develop a positive sense of themselves, and others; to form positive relationships and develop respect for others; to develop social skills and learn how to manage their feelings; to understand appropriate behaviour in groups; and to have confidence in their own abilities.
- **Literacy** development involves encouraging children to link sounds and letters and to begin to read and write.
- **Expressive arts and design** involves enabling children to explore and play with a wide range of media and materials, as well as providing opportunities and encouragement for sharing their thoughts, ideas and feelings through a variety of activities

### Supported by the following approaches to teaching and learning

- **planned, purposeful play**
- **a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity**
- **playing and exploring** - children investigate and experience things, and 'have a go'
- **active learning** - children concentrate and keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoy achievements
- **creating and thinking critically** - children have and develop their own ideas, make links between ideas, and develop strategies for doing things.

## Strategies

The following strategies are useful basics to help with structuring a piece of drama and were all modeled within the King Midas drama.

### Games

Games can be used in drama to establish trust, build confidence and to establish rules. They are useful for breaking the ice, are enjoyable, fun and enable a group to get to know each other. Games are also useful for allowing a teacher to observe the weaknesses and strengths of a particular group dynamic. This can give teachers the opportunity to tailor the use of games effectively to support children's creative and personal development.

Games are most meaningful when used in the context of a drama or story as in the story of King Midas where the children played a version of the game 'Freeze Tig' to explore Midas turning his children to gold. Many games can be easily adapted to fit into a story.

### Teacher-in-role

This is where the teacher assumes the role of a character within a story, such as King Midas. It can feel embarrassing at first but remember that children slip into role very easily and will accept you if you signal it clearly.

Signalling means telling them, "*When I put this crown on I'll be King Midas and then we will be in the story. Is everyone ready?*" and the same to come out of role.

Have a clear objective for going into role – Why are you doing it? What do you want to achieve? It is much more inclusive for children when they are being asked to be in the story if you are in it too!

### Still Image

The creation of an image using a group of people to capture a particular moment, idea or theme as in a photograph, painting, sculpture or video freeze frame.

E.g. An image of the moment when King Midas turns his children to gold by mistake. This can be used as a basis for **thought tracking** to find out the King's thoughts and feelings about what he has done

### Thought tracking

Where the drama is paused at a point that involves a character in a dilemma, moment of tension, or in the immediate aftermath of a significant event. Someone steps into the shoes of that character (possibly the teacher) and freezes into a still image of that moment; alternatively a piece of costume can be used to represent the character. Children are invited to reflect upon what the character is thinking and feeling and speak these thoughts/feelings out

loud. Older children can come up and lay a hand on the shoulder of the character as they speak, as if expressing the voices in their head.

### **Stories in a box**

Some of the significant events, places and characters from a story are represented by objects or pieces of costume and placed in a box or tin. As the story is told the storyteller gets each object out as the moment, person or event it represents is mentioned. The objects are then returned to the box as the story continues until the lid is replaced at the end of the story. These 'props' can help children to visualize the story, especially if it contains anything that may be unfamiliar to them. The children can then re-tell the story using the story box to support them in remembering significant moments. Multi-sensory items work very well – materials that have evocative smells or rich textures. Objects that provide a key sound effect can also be included.

The story box can also be used as a way of introducing a new story, allowing the children to become familiar with the story 'type' before hearing or participating in the story itself. Story boxes are also great for open creative play and free-form story making. They provide new and exciting materials/toys/props and the children can use the contents in any way they choose. If a story box becomes a regular feature then the children will look forward to seeing what has been placed inside as it constantly changes.

E.g. A box containing a crown, lots of gold objects and a butterfly puppet as an introduction to the King Midas story

### **Creating Story Places**

Whilst working on a story, you can designate an area to transform into an environment from it. Children can then go to this place to test their own ideas about the story and its meaning. This activity is closely akin to den making, and the environment can evolve over time, taking on different lives as children re-invest it with their ideas and further objects.

E.g. Creating the throne room at the palace of King Midas

### **Puppets**

Use puppets to act out parts of a story. As most puppets have no voice it becomes the job of the children to interpret what they are saying and their needs. Encouraging children to communicate with a puppet can be less threatening than direct communication with an adult and can allow children to occupy a higher status or caring position, particularly when the puppet is perceived to be in need, vulnerable, naughty or less experienced/naïve.

Alternatively make simple puppets/ finger puppets with children and perform a retelling of a story or play with them. The story can include narration, children making up their own descriptions, and deciding for themselves what they think the characters would say.

Everyday objects such as wooden spoons and gloves, knitted finger puppets, socks or found objects from outdoors such as leaves, twigs, stones etc can be used.

E.g. Children make their own butterfly puppets from the King Midas story and fly them home to collect wishes from family members which they later report back to the class

## **Drawing**

As individuals, a small group or a whole class, create an environment, object or a situation by drawing a picture. This can be as simple or as abstract as the teacher decides.

This activity provides the children with new opportunities for group discussion in the drama. It provides the scope to represent their ideas visually and to create an image that they can relate to. Children can also use a collective drawing to reflect upon their drama and can add text accordingly

E.g. Drawing the things that King Midas touches and turns to gold and deciding where they were in his palace when he touched them, then placing them on the floor to represent this.

## **Meetings**

This is where the class gather together in role to discuss any ideas and problems raised by the drama. It can be a formal or informal meeting and can be 'chaired' by the teacher or a child. It can be a means of giving further information, clarifying what is happening or creating new tension. A form of signal is useful to call a meeting. It may be a special sign, sound, gesture or chair.

It is essential that the children are clear that the meeting is 'in-role' and that they are speaking as, for example, King Midas's servants. Meetings encourage children to share and listen to each other's ideas, to gather information, and to make decisions. It is also a way in which the teacher can calm the children down and encourage them to think carefully about what is happening in the drama.

E.g. King Midas gathers his servants to advise him on how to break the 'curse' of his magic golden touch

## **Mime**

When the children use only physical movement, gesture and actions to express a dramatic idea or to dramatise a scene in the story. Percussion, sound or music may accompany the movements.

It allows the children to experience performing without using words and encourages them to concentrate on gesture, relationships and communication. It also allows children to reflect and to focus on a significant moment, because they have only one thing to think about.

## **Mimed actions with Narration**

The teacher takes on the role of narrator whilst children continue action with out speech. This can be used to move on time, to control action or to provide tension and atmosphere.

E.g. Children mime the various things King Midas touches and turns to gold, after having decided upon them in discussion with the teacher previously. S/he weaves their suggestions into the narrative which then supports and guides the children's mime.

It can also be employed in between scenes to link different parts of a story.

## **Narration**

This convention can be used in many different ways - the teacher providing narrative links in the story to move the drama forward, to model language, to provide structure, to issue instruction from within a story or to create atmosphere. It can also be used to focus on specific themes and issues that children are acting out. A child may also use narration.

Narration can be an advantage when trying to create an atmosphere and build belief. It can also be a means by which the teacher can control the drama and the direction it is to take and a way of encouraging and arousing the children's interest and imagination. It can be the framework within which the children develop their actions and behaviour.

E.g. The storytelling sections in King Midas

## **Dramatic Play**

This is the enacting of a situation without a direct focus or dilemma. It does not have a specific structure and is closely akin to play. It can also involve multi sensory articles to stimulate play.

It gives the children time to settle into the drama context, to get used to the space and to adapt to their roles. They are not concerned with sharing work, or pre- planning work.

Although the whole class may be carrying out dramatic play at the same time, it is often the case that the convention involves small group work.

E.g. the servants at work in Midas's palace, or finding gold to present to him.

## **Further resources**

### **Drama books**

**Supporting Creativity and Imagination in the Early Years** by Bernadette Duffy. Open University Press, ISBN 0-335-19871-6

**A Child's Work. The importance of fantasy play** by Vivian Gussin Paley. University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 0-226-64489-8

**Drama and Traditional Story for the Early Years** by Nigel Toye and Francis Prendiville. Routledge Falmer. ISBN 0415195365 - ISBN-13 9780415195362

**Beginning Drama 4-11** (Early Years & Primary) by Joe Winston and Miles Tandy. David Fulton Publishers Ltd. ISBN 1853467022 - ISBN-13 9781853467028

### **Stories from a range of cultural backgrounds for drama**

**King Midas's Goldfingers** by Saviour Pirotta

Orchard Books. ISBN-10 1843627825

**One Thousand and One Arabian Nights** retold by Geraldine McCaughrean

Oxford Press. ISBN 9780192750139

**Tales from Africa retold by Kathleen Arnott**

Oxford Press. ISBN 0192750798

**Folktales from India edited by A.K Ramanujan**

Pantheon Books. ISBN 0679748326

**Favourite Folktales from Around the World by Jane Yolen**

Pantheon Books. ISBN 978-0394751887