

Drama in the Foundation Stage

“Children rise above their average behaviour in play,” claims Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist who worked extensively on child development through play and particularly the relationship between language and thinking.

Observing children playing without adult intervention reveals innate ‘drama’ skills such as the ability to create, adopt and sustain roles, to interact with others in an imagined setting and to communicate feelings and atmosphere.

The increasing emphasis on creativity in the classroom is not a new concept. Plato in ‘The Republic’ stated that,
“Enforced exercise may benefit the body but enforced learning will not stay in the mind. Therefore avoid compulsion and let your children’s lessons take the form of play.”

As educators (irrespective of whether or not we are drama specialists) our job is to provide foundation stage children with structured play that will be enjoyable, challenging and exploratory. Experience shows that starting with a game to establish a non-verbal contract between the teacher and the children can be beneficial. The game should clearly demonstrate the ‘rules’ of this particular kind of playing i.e. that the play will be safe, that the play will be structured by the teacher and that the play will be inclusive (nobody will be left out).

A simple game such as ‘pass the magic stone’ will do all of this. Show the children a ‘magic stone’ (an interesting looking pebble) taking it carefully out of a special box. With the children sitting in a circle, they carefully pass the stone from one to another until it returns to the adult. Children are allowed to inspect the stone through sight, touch or even smell if they so wish. The important thing is that they take their time and treat the stone with care as they pass it from one child to the next. The game is a collective challenge and is designed to be slow and quiet to engender a calm atmosphere.

In ‘*Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*’ (QCA/00/587), early years practitioners are advised:

“Effective learning involves...children learning through movement and all their senses...creative and imaginative play activities that promote the development and use of language”.

“Well planned play” is also highlighted as *“a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge.”* Among other things this play enables children to *“explore, develop and represent learning experiences that help them make sense of the world...think creatively and imaginatively...(and to) express fears or relive anxious experiences in controlled and safe situations.”*

This clearly demands more than playing games so, once children have accepted the non-verbal contract, the next stage is to harness their ability to adopt roles in play. The most engaging way to do this is by the teacher adopting a role, this extends the ‘play contract’ through the teacher playing alongside the children. Patrice Baldwin (Chair of National Drama) believes:

“Teacher in Role is possibly the most powerful, interactive and engaging drama strategy of all and the most potent in relation to learning.”

Tell the children that you are going to “pretend to be someone else” and use a role signifier (a hat, a scarf a bag) to indicate clearly when you are adopting the role and when you are not. Use simple roles that will engage the children’s interest, sympathy or sense of fair play. Remember this is not about how well the teacher can act but how does the adopted character engage its audience, the children. The best roles to adopt with this age group are those who need help or advice from the children or those who need some specialist knowledge from the children. Examples of these are a child who is lost, a man who doesn’t know how to look after a baby, an alien who has never seen a wheel before.

This approach implicitly asks the children to adopt a collective role e.g. as helpers, as friends, as wheel experts. When in role, the teacher should use carefully framed questions to elicit thoughtful responses e.g. “How do you think I am feeling?”; “What do you think I should do?”; “How can you help me?” Also in role, the teacher can prompt children to clarify and explore their responses: “I am not sure what you mean”; “Can you explain that to me again?” In or out of role the teacher can use language to raise the status of the children e.g. “it is true...you are really helpful”; “well done, I knew I could trust you”; “I have come to the right place, they told me the children would understand”. This in turn raises the language register employed by the children.

If the children are adopting a role in a specific location then ‘occupational mime’ (acting out a task) e.g. tidying away toys, building a house, cutting down trees can help build the ‘imagined world’ of the drama. The mimed action contextualises the character the children are adopting reminding them who and where they are in the drama e.g. ask children to hold imaginary pencils and notepads if they are being police detectives and encourage them to write imaginary notes.

This approach has potential for all six areas of learning outlined in the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage. By carefully selecting the appropriate roles both for teacher and children, the learners can become engaged in personal, social and emotional development; communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development and creative development. Often a drama session will cover early learning goals from more than one curriculum area.

Lack of drama experience or drama training should not be a barrier to experimenting with this powerful learning methodology. Teachers should not worry about ‘teaching drama’ and start from where they feel safe, in the classroom and using an existing structure (circle time, literacy hour, PE, story time, carpet places). An initial session should perhaps include one game and some whole class role-play. Once the teacher and the children feel safe, more space could be used by moving some tables to the side and ‘teacher in role’ can be introduced. Planning for short, positive sessions of probably no more

than 25 minutes is a good way to start. Finishing the drama when things are going well will make both you and the children want to do more.

Creating bespoke 'dramas' for particular classes is always exciting but teachers should not feel guilty about dipping into the wealth of published materials. Any of the following titles will help teachers to structure drama for foundation stage children:

Drama Play: Bringing Books to Life Through Drama for 4 – 7 year-olds
- Kay Hiatt (ISBN: 1 84312 178 6)

Drama and Traditional Story for the Early Years
- Nigel Toye and Francis Prendiville (ISBN: 0 415 19536 5)

Pirates and Other Adventures (Role Play in the Early Years)
- Jo Boulton and Judith Ackroyd (ISBN: 1 84312 124 7)

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