

DRAMA & HISTORY - WW2: EVACUEES AND THE HOME FRONT



ARTS
on the move



WW2: Evacuees and the Home Front

Fitting National Curriculum drama requirements into English time can be a problem. But Alison Chaplin has an exciting solution: why not develop children's drama skills at the same time as you deepen their understanding of another curriculum area?

Drama has a much higher profile in the revised English Order, and is firmly placed as a specific strand within Speaking and Listening. Teachers are now required to incorporate established drama methods into their approach, but some face difficulties with this: firstly, that of finding time for pupils to participate in drama-based activities; and secondly, finding the space to deliver such activities. The solution is to find ways of working with drama that combine two curriculum areas, thus covering two sets of objectives at the same time, and to do this using methods requiring little additional space. This article offers examples of drama activities that have been used to explore the historical area of Britain since 1930 - specifically The Home Front.

Drama in the National Curriculum

The revised National Curriculum notes the range and skills required for learning and progression in drama and these are specified as follows:

Key Stage 1

Range. The range of drama activities should include:

- a working in role
- b presenting drama and stories to others e.g. Telling a story through tableaux or using a narrator
- c responding to performances.

Skills. To participate in a range of drama activities, pupils should be taught to:

- a use language and actions to convey situations, characters and emotions
- b create and sustain roles individually and when working with others
- c comment constructively on drama they have watched or in which they have participated.

Key Stage 2

Range. The range of drama activities should include:

- a improvisation and working in role
- b scripting and performing plays
- c responding to performances.

Skills. To participate in a wide range of drama activities and to evaluate their own and others' contributions, pupils should be taught to:

- a create, adapt and sustain different roles, individually and in groups
- b use character, action and narrative to convey story themes, emotions and ideas in devised and scripted plays
- c use dramatic conventions to explore characters and issues, e.g. hot seating, flashback, representing issues in different ways
- d evaluate their own and others' contributions to the overall effectiveness of performances.

The termly objectives for drama are derived from the three main strands of making (or creating), performing (or writing), and responding to drama. These provide a progression in drama activities, allowing both pupils and teachers to develop their skills, knowledge and understanding from basic improvisation techniques in Year 1 through to presenting scripted performances in Year 6.

Why use drama to explore history?

Delivering lessons which fulfil these termly objectives can result in a planning nightmare for teachers, regardless of the additional problems of lack of time and space. Consequently, any ideas which provide suggestions for covering two curriculum areas at once should be seized upon with glee! I have found that children find learning more interesting, and absorb more factual information when drama methods have been used to explore areas of history. History, after all, is about interesting people facing dilemmas and making important decisions - the very stuff of many a drama lesson. Pupils as young as five years have left an 'historical drama' session I've delivered knowing when the Victorians lived, why they were called the Victorians and how Victorian home and school lives compare with present times in so many ways - far exceeding the objectives for history at Key Stage 1.

Using drama methods to learn about The Home Front

The Home Front, or Britain during World War 2, is a period in history which can provide a fascinating learning experience for children. The knowledge that people in this country, and, for many, people in their own families, actually lived through this period provides interest, even before they explore the difficulties faced during that time. The following methods for exploring aspects of life in Britain during WW2 were covered in a 90 minute lesson with a Y6 class, but could easily be expanded or condensed or selected from for longer or shorter sessions, or adapted to suit younger pupils.

Teacher in role

Adopt the role of Neville Chamberlain announcing the beginning of the War. Put on a suitable jacket, if you have one, and say: 'My name is Neville Chamberlain, and I am the Prime Minister of Britain. It is Sunday September the 3rd, 1939, and we in Britain are in a state of war with Germany'. Invite the children to ask questions of Neville Chamberlain, ensuring that you have researched as much information as possible in advance! When you want to come out of role, remove the jacket or alter your position.

Group discussion

Ask the children as a class to consider what changes they might see in their immediate surroundings when the war started. Answers should include: blackout curtains at windows; sandbags placed in doorways; huge water tanks positioned in the street; windows criss-crossed with tape; no street lights when it gets dark, and so on. The discussion should enable children to absorb as much information about these changes as possible.

Pair improvisation

Ask the children to work with a partner and to act out the roles of children living at the time who are talking about the changes they see in their street. Encourage them to use both dialogue, body language and facial expressions when noticing and discussing the sights around them.

Group discussion

Invite the children to consider and discuss as a class where they might have sheltered when the German planes were threatening an air raid, i.e. overhead bombing. Answers should include air raid shelters.

Using text as a stimulus

Distribute short pieces of information about the two main types of air raid shelters available to British families in their homes: Morrison and Anderson (see box below). Read through this information as a large group. Then form the children into groups of three to four with at least one boy per group, in order to ensure that children adopt and sustain the appropriate stereotypical roles of the period.

MORRISON SHELTER

Because people were often reluctant to go outside to use the Anderson, the Government introduced a new type of shelter which could be set up inside the house, usually in the living room. It looked like a large steel table and was often used as one when not serving its intended! Although it appeared small, two adults and two children could sleep comfortably in it. The Morrison was not so strong as the Anderson, but it was more popular - air raids seemed less frightening in the familiar surroundings of the home.

ANDERSON SHELTER

The very fortunate people who had a garden at that time had what was called an Anderson shelter. Like the Morrison Shelter, the materials for these were issued by the Government. Anderson shelters consisted of a square hole dug in the soil about four feet deep which was then covered over on the top by sheets of curved corrugated iron. A small entrance was left at one end and the whole construction was then covered with soil and clumps of earth. Most Anderson shelters also included benches inside for family members to rest on and many families planted on the soil covering the roof!

Adopting roles in small groups

Ask the groups to improvise a family discussing which type of air raid shelter to build for their house. Advise the children that these discussions should be based on the facts provided about each shelter and encourage them to respond in role, appropriately, as family members.

Small group mime

Ask the children to mime building their chosen air raid shelter (action without speech or sound) and then to stand outside it with their family.



Group discussion

Ask each group to reveal which shelter they chose to build and why. Explain that the ARP (air raid protection) wardens often gave warnings of air raids using a rattle. Tell the children that when you sound the warning signal (whatever you choose to suggest a rattle), they are to get into their air raid shelter. Allow a pause and then give the signal.

Tableaux

When the family are inside their air raid shelter, ask them to freeze in appropriate positions of fear as they shelter from the air raid. Encourage the children to hold these positions silently for a slow count of three.

Change tableaux

Now ask the children to create a new freeze position showing their family having a meal around the dining table.

Group discussion

Explain about food rationing and how some food items were rare, or unobtainable, during WW2. Invite children to suggest what some of these items might have been and why. Answers should include: fruit; chocolate; meat; sugar; butter; eggs; tea; cheese and so on.

Small group improvisation

Ask the children to improvise the children in the family asking for an item of food which is rationed. Encourage those children in the role of parents to respond appropriately.

Responding to drama

Allow the improvisations to continue for a few seconds and then invite each group to reveal which food item was requested, how it was refused and what reason was given for not providing it.

Group discussion

Ask the children as a class whether everyone stayed at home during the war. Encourage them to think about adults who left to serve in the armed forces, adults who worked in supportive roles on the land, in the mines and in factories, and children who were evacuated to the country for safety. The following activities should focus on the evacuees.

Pair improvisation

Ask the children to work with a partner and improvise the scene of a child who doesn't want to leave saying goodbye to her mother. Encourage children to sustain their roles and to act them out realistically. Ask them to consider why the children had to leave, and how the mothers would encourage them to do so.

Presenting drama to others

View some or all of these improvised scenes.

Small group tableaux

Form the children into groups of six to eight. Ask them to create a freeze picture of the scene at a railway station with children being evacuated on the train, their mothers on the platform waving goodbye and teachers or other adults accompanying the children preparing them for what lies ahead. Encourage the children to use their faces and bodies expressively to represent the way that their character is feeling and thinking at the moment of the freeze.

Responding to drama

View all of these tableaux and discuss each one, asking the children to consider and comment on each group's use of space, realistic portrayal of the scene, what individual characters might be feeling or thinking and so on.

Group discussion

Ask the children to consider how the evacuees might feel when they arrive at their new temporary homes.

Pair improvisation

Ask the children to work with a partner and to improvise (act out) the moment of the evacuees' arrival at their new home. Encourage them to consider a variety of responses, from fear and loneliness to curiosity and even mild excitement. Instil the concept that not all the evacuees hated being evacuated: some came from difficult circumstances; and many saw it as a holiday, or adventure, which would soon be over.

Pair freezes

Whilst the children are acting out their improvisations, ask them to freeze the action, showing the feelings and reactions of the characters involved.

Responding to drama

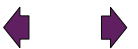
View as many of these pair freezes as possible, encouraging the children to consider and comment on the perceived relationship between the characters and how the frozen actions reflect what each character is thinking or feeling.

Responding in role

Ask the children to sit back to back with their partners and to label themselves A and B. Explain that A is to play the role of an evacuated child and B is to play the role of a child who remains in the family home during the war. Ask the As to explain how they feel, what their experiences have been, what they have felt about their evacuation and what their new home is like; Bs must just listen carefully to the As' words, without moving or making a sound. After a few minutes, repeat the process with Bs explaining to As how they feel about staying behind, what their fears are, what they miss or long for, what they like about their current life and what they hate about their situation. After a few minutes, ask all of the Bs to find a new A, then tell the children to swap roles (so that those who were in role as evacuees now become children left behind and vice versa) and repeat the exercise.

Responding to drama

Invite the children to feed back some of the thoughts and feelings they expressed in each of the roles they enacted.



Writing in role

Distribute small pieces of paper and pens or pencils. Ask the children to work alone in a space and to write the diary entry for a day in the life of a child living through WW2 either as an evacuee or as a child who remained at home. Encourage the children to write down their thoughts, feelings and aspects of their day which have affected them. These diary extracts may highlight positive events, or pleasurable experiences, or may reveal feelings of fear or sadness caused by facing difficult circumstances.

Presenting drama to others

Invite some of the children to read their diary extracts out loud to the rest of the class. Comment positively on these contributions and thank each child for their efforts.

Teacher in role

Adopt the role of Winston Churchill (putting the jacket on again if you want to) and declare: 'I am Winston Churchill, Britain's prime minister. It is Monday the 8th of May 1945 and the war in Europe has come to an end. Britain is no longer at war with Germany'. Invite the children to ask questions of Winston Churchill, ensuring that, again, you have researched as much information as possible! When you want to come out of role, remove the jacket or change your position to denote the switch from character.

Whole group tableaux

Explain to the children that everyone in Britain celebrated the ending of the war in Europe and that huge street parties were held, with whole neighbourhoods donating food items, producing home-made bunting, setting out long tables and rows of chairs and then enjoying eating, drinking, dancing and singing long into the night. Ask the class to arrange themselves in two rows facing each other and to adopt the position of British people celebrating the end of the war at a street party. When all of the children have adopted suitable poses, tell the group to freeze and hold the scene for a slow count of 5.

Responding to drama

Invite the class to comment on their involvement in the drama by asking such questions as:

- Did you enjoy it?
- Why?
- What did you learn that you didn't know before taking part in the drama?
- What did you find out which surprised you?
- What else would you like to find out about Britain during World War 2?
- What was the most interesting part of the drama for you?
- What do you think is the most important thing you have learnt about life in Britain during World War 2?

Acknowledge all responses and thank the children for their enthusiastic participation.

WIDE RANGING POSSIBILITIES

The class who participated in this lesson were given, through the drama, a brief insight into many aspects of life in Britain during WW2 and these then provided the teachers with a number of starting points for classroom work, further investigation and additional drama lessons. A variety of drama methods were covered, all with direct links to the termly objectives, and many elements of the history scheme of work were also addressed. The diary extracts written by the children were particularly interesting and showed considerable maturity and awareness in both their content and emotional tone.

Drama methods such as those outlined above can be applied to any other area of the history curriculum, giving teachers and pupils the means to bring the facts and figures of history to life. There is also a wide range of other methods, some of which I list below, that can be used to enhance the study of history.

Role on the wall

Using a long sheet of paper, ask a child to lie on it and draw carefully around them. This outline then represents a character from history. On the inside of the body shape, invite the children to write words, sentences or phrases (don't worry about correct spelling and grammar) which reveal the thoughts and feelings of the character, emphasising their emotional state; on the outside of the outline, ask the children to write pieces of factual information about the character, particularly anything which may be relevant to decisions they make, or which may affect their emotional state. Display the outline (on the wall) and use it as a constant reference point, changing or adding items as more is discovered about the historical character.

Debate

Form the children into two groups to discuss a particular historical decision or dilemma. Invite one group to argue for and the other to argue against, giving each group arguments which support their viewpoint. Allow children time to prepare their arguments, but dissuade them from using the benefit of hindsight as much as possible!

Mantle of the expert

This is similar to a debate, except that the children should be allocated specific roles which give them some kind of expertise or interest. The whole class then responds in role as individuals meeting to discuss a particular situation, problem or decision. The teacher should act as the head of the meeting, although some children may be able to adopt this role. An action must be decided on by the end of the meeting.

Doubling

Children split into groups to improvise a scene from history involving up to five characters. The scenes are viewed by the rest of the class. Then, other members of the class are asked to rest their hands on the shoulders of those acting the scene and to reveal the hidden thoughts or feelings of the character they are 'doubling'. This often provides children with an insight into how difficult some decisions were and reveals the 'human' side of characters from history - turning them into real people.

Hot seating

Place a character from history on the 'hot seat', asking them questions about events they were involved in. This could be as simple as asking a mother whose child has been evacuated why she made the decision to send her child to the country and how she feels about her decision; or it could be asking Neville Chamberlain why he declared war on Germany. Either pupils or teachers can be placed on the hot seat and drama can be paused at any time to include this technique, continuing once the questioning is over.

Press conference

This is an extension of the hot seating technique. A character from history holds a press conference. Children work in role as members of the press, the individual concerned, his or her associates, camera operators, sound technicians and so on. Members of the press should work in groups prior to the conference to decide what questions they want to ask. This event can be as simple or elaborate as you want to make it: distributing press badges, using a real video camera, providing costumes for bodyguards and associates, setting up microphones, and so on. It works on either level.



Newspaper interviews

In pairs, children interview characters from history as reporters from a newspaper, trying to get 'an angle' to help them write the story of events and compile a newspaper. Roles can be swapped to allow all pupils the opportunity to be interviewed. Reports can then be written up, either as straight recounts of what happened or with a particular bias or slant.

Television news programme

This follows a similar format to the newspaper interviews. Several important events or issues from a particular period in history can be compiled into TV news format. Children should write the stories, fleshing them out where only a small amount of information is available, and present them together as a TV news programme - including outside broadcasts, interviews, and even a weather bulletin! Again, this can be elaborate or simple: the programmes can be recorded using a video camera; interviews can be conducted using real microphones; the weather chart can be drawn according to how the country looked at that time, and so on.

Further Reading (Practical Drama)

Chaplin A (1999) *Drama Workshop 5 to 7*

Chaplin A (1999) *Drama Workshop 7 to 9*

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Chaplin A (January 2001) *Performance Play: The Big Ship Sails* Scholastic

Chaplin A (January 2002) *Performance Play: Whistle As You Walk Away* Scholastic



References

Teaching speaking and listening in Key Stages 1 and 2, QCA (1999).

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