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Submitted: 16/06/2021 - Accepted: 16/07/2021 - Published: 27/08/2021

Drama in Education Reaching Beyond the “Art Form or Teaching Tool” Dichotomy

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DOI: [10.26417/ejser.v5i3.p70-77](https://doi.org/10.26417/ejser.v5i3.p70-77)

Abstract

In the following article we try to re-evaluate, the place drama occupies in contemporary elementary education. By limiting the role of drama to literature studies and theatre productions, we lose a greater potential Theatre Pedagogy has to offer to a much broader educational spectrum. The participatory practices of Theatre and Drama in Education (TiE, DiE) promote active learning, based on a most organic children’s activity – play. While students co-create the fictional world of drama, teacher’s guidance is crucial in setting new challenges, encouraging students to find creative solutions and reflect on often-complex social issues. Because of its art component, drama challenges the participants on a cognitive as well as emotional level, becoming a truly transformational experience. As such, Drama in Education is especially useful when approaching sensitive and controversial topics. This thesis is presented on a case study observing Year 6 students at St’ Michael’s CE Academy in Birmingham, UK, using Drama in Education method as part of History curriculum.

Keywords: drama in education, theatre pedagogy, participatory practices, holistic teaching, sensitive topics

Introduction

Theatre or drama education is, in accordance with the rich tradition of Dorothy Heathcote, Gavin Bolton, and other founders of theatre pedagogy, in Anglo-Saxon

education systems represented much more than in Slovenia. Contrary to our predominant practice, however, it is not primarily (for) preparing a theatre project intended to be presented to the interested public, but it is a key emphasis on an integrated approach to the treatment of selected learning content. Thus, the methods of theatre pedagogy are not limited to a single subject, but they can be used by teachers from all subject areas, not stemming from the traditional position of power, but by transferring a large part of the decisions to the pupils and merely directing them to the set goals. Everything takes place in the form of a drama play, also called drama in education (DiE), where teacher and pupils take on different roles, and, when necessary, stop playing them and later go back to them again. The methods of theatre pedagogy are suitable for dealing with emotionally complex topics, since the role paradoxically simultaneously enables both the total emotional proximity and the necessary critical distance in defining the chosen theme.

In this paper, I am presenting an example of a drama in education that deals with the historical theme of the Holocaust and the Second World War, which I followed as an external observer, as an academic guest at the Birmingham City University (UK). In the case study, children aged 10 to 11 were involved, who were moved within the safe, fictitious world of drama to the time just before World War II and accompanied their peer Inge (in the role of a teacher/actress) on a forced trip from Berlin to Birmingham. In selected roles, they encountered difficulties in integrating themselves into the new environment and reflected on modern-day refugees.

Theatre Pedagogy - Definition of the Field

Although we could also decide for a term drama pedagogy, theatre pedagogy appears to be more appropriate, since in the Slovenian school field, drama is primarily associated with literary art, and not with theatrical. As such, the term encompasses various drama techniques that are used in the creative process in the theatre and are suitable for pedagogical work as an adapted version in the classroom. The most commonly used drama techniques in the class include: warming up play, confidence play, concentration play, role play, group work, interpretative narration, improvisation, dramatization, critical reflection, etc. (Heathcote v O'Neill 2015; Bolton 1986; Swale 2009).

In the field of theatre pedagogy, we also have (in Slovenia) lesser-known integrated learning approaches that can be placed under the *Drama in Education* (DiE)¹ concept, used by Heathcote (in O'Neill 2015), Bolton (1986, 1999), O'Toole (1992) etc. Drama in education is an integral process that cannot be limited to a single drama technique - similarly theatre performance combines various arts, drama in education connects many different drama techniques and if the key goals of artistic drama are primarily aesthetic, drama in education combines also pedagogical and educational goals.

¹ In the continuation, I will occasionally use a shorter term of drama for drama in education, whereby, (to the extent not explicitly stated), I do not mean classic literary work.

(Bolton 1986). Drama in education is often defined as a process activity, which is contrary to the literary version of the classic drama of the Western European tradition - this is supposed to aim for the final, finished product. From this inconsistency, many misunderstandings of the drama in education in our country (Slovenia) originate which in the framework of school and out-of-school activities are often inspired by the classical theatre drama, directed mainly to the final product, public presentation.

Drama in Education - the Key Elements

Since its inception in Great Britain in the 1950s, drama in education has already undergone several stages of development and, consequently, different definitions, but certain drama elements appear in all, even though they are differently represented. The following elements are summarized mainly from the theoretical and practical findings of Dorothy Heathcote (in O'Neill: 2015) and Gavin Bolton (1986; 1999), considered the founders of contemporary theatre pedagogy in both the UK and around the world.

Context of drama fiction

Heathcote (in O'Neill 2015) defines the drama in education as a "reconstruction of life", but in this, for a precisely selected part of the real context, it is placed into the world of drama fiction for the purpose of further analysis and reflection. Of course, during the duration of the drama, everyone must believe in a fictional context, in the so-called "big lie" (ibid.) that the drama can even happen. A fictional context can be pre-selected by a teacher or co-shaped with pupils. It affects all other elements.

Roles and relationships

Taking various roles is at the centre of any drama, and drama in education. Teacher's and pupils' roles are replaced at different times for a variety of drama roles, and they can again take on the previous one, if required by the pedagogical process, which is a key difference compared to a classical drama where, during the duration of the drama, actors cannot, under any circumstances, exit from the given roles. It is not immaterial, what social status and personality traits have a chosen role, but, of course, as in the context of drama fiction, the pupils themselves can contribute a lot. Both Bolton and Heathcote (in McGuinn 2014) attach great emphasis to the role of the teacher, which must be carefully selected so that it can influence the course of dramatic events - it increases dramatic tension, offers a new perspective, etc. If pupils are deemed to forget that during the duration of the drama they are actually part of the learning process and are fully immersed in the fictional context of the drama, this is by no means true for the teacher. His/her primary "role" is to achieve the set learning goals (ibid.). At this point it makes sense to emphasize that the role of pupils is taken voluntarily (they can also be group roles), in one way or another, they actively participate in dramatic events - in contrast to the classical drama there is no sharp division of performers and the audience.

Dramatic tension

Dramatic tension is the driving force of the drama. It cannot be easily defined, but at any time we know whether it is present or not. The development of dramatic tension is crucial for the successful implementation of the drama in education, but it must always come from the very dramatic situation and should not be the result of external factors such as lack of time, authoritarian intervention of the teacher, etc. (Heathcote v O'Neill 2015). Heathcote (ibid.) often warned that dramatic tension is in the domain of the theatre, while teachers often have difficulty in establishing an appropriate atmosphere. Of course, the level of dramatic tension depends on each individual group, and it is also necessary to adjust it throughout the duration of the drama.

Time and space

Drama in education always happens at a given moment that is unrepeatable, which in itself causes a certain level of the already mentioned dramatic tension. Of course, this is true for real time; as fictitious time passes slightly differently. The teacher can (with the participation of pupils), if necessary, rewind or skip some events at a time, insofar as he/she considers this to be appropriate in a given dramatic situation. A similar dichotomy also controls the spatial field, where the relationship between the real and the fictitious space is a matter of agreement between the participants of the drama (Heathcote in O'Neill 2015).

Language and movement

Language and movement may seem to act as completely separate elements at first, but they are often inseparable in drama. Movement is an important complementation or can even fully take over the place of verbal communication, which is usually promoted in the drama in education as it is a method of expression that is often neglected in the framework of the existing educational system (the emphasis on the linguistic intelligence (Gardner 1995). Pupils increase expression of their body, understand theatre language, which is always alive and present. Development of communicative literacy is one of the important goals of drama in education. Although the theatre has been sticking to the subordination of word art for centuries, and searching for its own language of expression, in accordance with the prevailing guidelines of communication instruction, the teaching of the language of drama in education is an extremely suitable medium for the "natural" adoption of various language structures, registers, intonations, etc. (McGuinn 2014).

Symbols and meanings

A symbolic value of a drama is not limited to the reference to certain characters/props, but rather, in drama in education, it focuses more on symbolic drama acts that occur in a fictional context, but can be applied to the real context. Heathcote (in Wagner: 1999) and Bolton (1986) develop drama symbols in the so-called "universal sense", which is difficult for students to comprehend due to

complexity in the real world, but in the world of drama fiction they relive them from different perspectives, and thus they also understand the often contradictory views. Even Vygotsky (1978) advocated the thesis that, through a symbolic play (which represents the starting point for drama in education), the child recruits various conflicts of the real world and thus gradually integrates into a wider social community. But even at higher levels of abstract thinking, the safe world of drama fiction allows children (and adults) to actively test different theoretical concepts, which can lead to the elimination of established patterns of behaviour and, consequently, into wider social changes. According to the teachings of the established school of theatre of the oppressed Augusto Boal (1995), theatre is no less than an exercise for the revolution. In addition, although this is an extreme thought, Boal (ibid.) clearly implies that the power of the theatre pedagogy should not be underestimated.

Drama in Education - Case Study

As part of the Erasmus+ Teaching Staff Exchange at the Birmingham City University, I had the opportunity to observe an example of drama in education at St. Michael CE Academy in Birmingham. The learning approach was similar to a related form of *Theatre in Education* (TiE), as independent theatre educators/performers/teachers/actors participated in execution.¹ Nevertheless, I will retain the term drama in education when describing it, since an in-school teacher could set the school lesson in a similar way.

Drama in education was held during a regular class at St. Michael CE Academy, which consists of a nursery and a primary school. It dealt with the historical theme of the Holocaust and the Second World War. It was intended for students of the 6th grade, aged between 10-11. We started in the classroom, and later we moved to the gym. In-school teachers only monitored the drama as observers, only occasionally they helped pupils with an additional explanation, suggestion, etc. Drama in education was run by two independent teachers/actors, members of the *The Play House* theatre, which deals exclusively with drama and theatre in education.

In the following, I quote the initial section of my own logbook, as it was instigated with careful observation of the drama in education, and summarized analyses and breakdowns previously mentioned. Written text does, of course, not replace the live experience, which is always the foundation of any theatre event, but aims to illuminate the theoretical concepts from the previous chapter. The log record below is written in italics and the analysis is upright.

Teachers/actors come to the classroom completely dressed, carrying some suitcases. The teacher/actor addresses the children with the question of whether they love

¹ Theatre in Education (TiE) is a related genre of drama in education. It is still very participatory, but it can be almost a performance event. Performers or teachers/actors often travel from school to school and present their own program. Theatre in education therefore fits somewhere between a drama in education and an artistic performative event (O'Toole 1992).

interesting stories and, after hearing affirmative answers, explains that today we will learn an interesting story, which will be narrated with the help of the children themselves.

Drama starts in class, with no additional costume design, scenography. Pupils are sitting in their seats; they have school utensils on the tables and are waiting for a learning process to continue. Suitcases, brought by the two teachers/actors, are the only props, and have in themselves a strong symbolic meaning, which triggers a certain dramatic tension. Usually, rich scenography and costume design in the theatre are primarily intended for the audience, but this is not the case in drama in education - all present persons are also performers. Teachers/actors clearly tell that the story will be a product of mutual cooperation.

The teacher/actor then tells that the story will talk about people who had to run away from their homes in 1938. He asks them why they think people had to run away then? Children say that due to war, bombing, etc. When the teacher/actor has enough answers, he projects a photograph of a statue of three Jewish children, which is located in London, on the schoolboard. He asks, which of the children is Inge, that is, the little girl the story will talk about.

The teacher/actor makes a clear reference to the subject of the previous history class, and pupils help to create the time and space of the drama fiction in invoking already known facts. A real photo of the monument is also introduced. Realistic resources, such as photos, maps, letters, etc., often occur in drama in education, helping to build a real historical context.

When the pupils recognize the statue of Inge with the joint forces, the teacher/actor announces that we will now meet Inge, to which the, until now, silent teacher/actress, immediately transforms with a help of a red hat. The kids greet Inge, who then returns to the background. The actor/teacher announces that we will now temporarily move into the present and learn about the contemporary refugee Imran, to which the teacher/actor transforms with the help of a hat. Imran is waiting at the train station, not knowing what will happen to him.

A head cover is a simple and effective way to transform from a teacher into a particular fictitious character or selected fictitious characters. There is no need for rich and realistic costumes in the drama in education, but simple costume design elements such as a hat, a cape, etc., help children recognize them as a teacher/actor and their roles.

Soon after the introduction of the primary story arc, the teacher/actor introduces a new fictitious time and space and, consequently, a parallel story. Since this is a current socio-political situation, the teacher/actor must be particularly careful not to fall into the ideological discourse of any political option.

The teacher/actor then announces that we will now be following Inge along the crystal night. Teacher/actress in the role of Inge, is frightened and hides under a table, while in the background pupils can hear the sound effects of breaking windows, shouts, etc. The teacher/actor asks children what they think happened on the crystal night. After a few answers, the teacher/actor suggests they should ask Inge or a teacher/actress, who answers them as a ten-year-old frightened girl.

An illustrative depiction of a traumatic historical event creates a considerable amount of dramatic tension. The sound basis, and, above all, emotional reactions of the frightened peer, enable the children to enjoy the world of drama fiction, developing empathy and simultaneously interacting with the already known historical subject. Without emotional involvement, it is impossible to revive it, and the precise connection between emotions and reason is the basis for integrated learning as a key guideline for theatre pedagogy.

The pupils observe the teacher/actress in the role of Inge, how she puts the most necessary items in a small suitcase, which she will take with her on her journey. Pupils are then divided into five groups (in-school teachers help with group formation) and each group receives a small suitcase, and a pile of paper sheets. Every pupil receives his own sheet of paper, on which he writes only the most urgent items that he would take with him if he should suddenly leave home. Each group then collects the sheets of paper, puts them in a suitcase, and then "travels" to the gym.

In this part of the drama, pupils are the most active so far. Because they have already accustomed to this dramatic situation, the teacher/actor can now appeal to their own living situation. In this kind of activity, which can be extremely effective, even therapeutic, we must respect the privacy of pupils. It is enough to think about certain things on their own, if they do not want to share with the group, because they interpret drama with their own (sometimes traumatic) experiences. Imaginary travel is now also followed by a physical journey (drama in education seeks to integrate as many senses as possible), which coincides with the topic discussed.

In the gym, children sit on mats and immediately meet Imran, who is still waiting at the station (a prop is introduced - a traffic sign indicating the station). We then meet Inge a year before the Crystal Night, when she is safely playing at home. On the radio, she suddenly hears an audio recording in which Adolf Hitler reads the already introduced ban imposed on Jews, e.g. ban of bicycle riding, cinema visit, etc. The inscription "Juden Verbotten" is presented, which was placed to many public places. Kids follow how quickly Inge's life changes - she loses her former friends, no one comes to her birthday party, she has to give up her pet, starts going to a special school for Jewish children (because the Jews are not Germans!), she must wear David's star ... Teacher/actor

interrupts the course of the story with an intriguing question: "Do you imagine that your teachers would separate you like this?" Children react with a great deal of uncertainty.¹

When they go to another room, a time slip happens- suddenly, we are moved to the time when the outbursts of the upcoming tragedy appeared. We are monitoring all through the prism of Inge, that is, the peer of children, which is often overlooked at the horrors of war, but which children can easily understand. Various authentic materials are being introduced (sound recording of Hitler's speech, David's star, etc.), which symbolize the real historical situation. The actor, with a very clear question, moves discrimination to modern times and with the parallel flow of Imran's story clearly shows that history can repeat itself at any time.

So, we go back to the Crystal Night and Inge repeats the scene from the class again. We meet Inge's father (teacher/actor) who is thinking about sending Inge somewhere where she would be safe. He asks pupils whether he should tell Inge that he is sending her away from home? The children suggest that he should tell Inge that she is going on holiday, that he loves her and she will soon come back, etc. Inge's father asks the children if it is really better to intentionally lie to Inge? Opinions among children are not uniform. Inge's father then thanks the children for their help and summarises their arguments. He decides to tell Inge the truth.

The above section is meaningful from the perspective of taking into account the views of children, which is crucial for drama in education. It is important that when we ask children for an opinion, this is also taken into account in further course of the drama. Participants should have the feeling that their decisions influence the course of events; otherwise they would only have a passive role of observers. Of course, for a large group of children, opinion is often shared, in which case the teacher/actor must justify why he chose one of the options. In the reflection phase, we can also consider the unseen options and whether the drama could be considered in a different way.

Inge comes from school and the children accompany conversation with her father, which turns into a moving farewell. Inge's father gives his daughter a grandmother's medallion. The teacher/actor says that the day of departure came and Inge must go away. He explains that her parents are not allowed to go to the platform from where Inge will departure by train, Inge so waves away somewhere in the distance, and suddenly "freezes" in the middle of movement. The teacher/actor asks children what her face tells them? The children respond that she is sad, thinking about her family, etc. The teacher/actor then tells us that there are some other children on the platform and asks for volunteers. Almost all children want to be volunteers, but the teacher only chooses a few. He tells them that he will count to three and then they should freeze like Inge, with an expression that shows their feelings at a given moment. Then he tells everyone that some children were too young to know exactly what was going on, some of them thought

¹ St. Michael CE Academy is a highly intercultural institution, visited by students of different nationalities and religions (Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, etc.).

it was just a trip, explaining the laughter of some volunteers. He asks children on the stage how they feel, they respond and go back among their classmates.

Mimics and gestures are an important part of developing communicative abilities and are often highlighted by drama in education. A drama technique, named image theatre (Boal 2012), that is, "frozen images", helps in expressing and accepting non-verbal messages, paying special attention to the recognition of often complex and difficult-to-describe emotional states.

It is also sensible to emphasize a quick reaction of the teacher/actor when the established dramatic tension is interrupted by child's laughter, not really appropriate in the given situation, but the teacher/actor makes sense in a wider fictitious context so that the drama can smoothly continue. Since the drama in education is largely improvised, this kind of quick action is the rule rather than the exception.

Imran comes to life again. In the background, we hear announcements of arrival and departure of buses. Imran tries to phone his brother Mohammed, who is supposed to meet him in Birmingham - unsuccessfully. Then we go back to Inge. The teacher/actor asks for two volunteers who are introduced in the role, the rest of the audience do not hear what the role is, because they are sitting on two gymnastic benches facing each other, representing a train carriage. Children carry suitcases from the class. The train is leaving (sound of the departing train), children look through the windows, they wave, leaving their home ... Inge walks in with her suitcase and asks if there is a place for her, as she already walked through the whole train and there was no empty seat. The children are happy to let her take a sit. Inge teaches children some simple songs that her grandmother sang. Children become very playful. Suddenly, the teacher/actor and two volunteer children in the role of the Nazis arrive in the carriage (the roles are indicated by hats). They say hello with "Heil Hitler!" The atmosphere is immediately changed. The Nazis are robbing items from suitcases; they take Inge her grandmother's medallion, because the Jews are not allowed to have jewellery. At the departure, the Nazis shout "Heil Hitler!«, demand the same from the children, but some children resist, and do not say these words. Inge tells everyone that they took her grandmother's medallion, which is extremely valuable to her and asks the children what they took from them.

I am concluding this section from the logbook with one of the most memorable parts of the described drama in education, the part in which good and evil are directly confronted. Earlier, evil appeared in the form of symbols, sound material, etc., but now it is the first time that it is presented as a personalized role. The teacher/actor decides to have two children besides him as Nazis. Just before their arrival, the teacher/actress creates a carefree cheerful atmosphere with playful singing. Thus, the arrival of personalized evil makes an even stronger impression. Tension in the room is palpable, and some children also actively resist evil. Insofar as their reaction would increase the permissible limit, the teacher/actor would simply turn back into the role of a teacher, which is a good mechanism for regulating dramatic tension.

The next scene with Inge, in which children have the opportunity to share contents of their suitcases, as it was conceived in the class, is also meaningfully set. According to the drama rule "Chekhov's gun", all introduced props must come to the forefront eventually, which is completely organically integrated into the drama through the act of violent deprivation.

I briefly summarize the continuation and conclusion of the drama play:

The drama continues with the arrival in England when Inge comes to live with an English family. We are following her difficulties in adapting to a new environment, where it is not easy for her, as English classmates mark her as "German", she is getting used to a new language, new cultural habits, and, at the same time, misses her family in Germany very much. We can draw parallels with Imran's position - he also found himself abroad, without a family, and encountered disapproval of the surrounding area.

The teacher/actor tells us that Inge tried to find her parents after the war, but failed. She created a family in England and died of old age. The teacher/actor suggests that children play a scene in the next hour, in which adult Inge and Imran meet. What would they have to say to each other ...

The open end of the drama in education gives an in-school teacher an excellent starting point for further work in the classroom, which can be simply a continuation of the drama in contemporary or any other time, new people can be involved in the drama, or the scenes that have already been seen, which require additional attention and in-depth reflection.

Definitely, the reflection phase is crucial for every activity related to the field of theatre pedagogy. It brings about the conception of often-condensed theatre events and takes place both, on the emotional and the rational level. The goals of this kind of reflecting go far beyond just reaching the set standards in the curriculum, since with the help of in-depth reflection, we try to offer a different perspective of reality and life outside the school walls, and it places an important emphasis on the development of personal principles and values.

Conclusion

From the described example of drama in education it is clear that the range of theatre media in elementary school reaches through the preparation of school plays and the visit of the theatre institution once a year and can serve as a thoroughly thought-out learning approach that still preserves artistic elements. The interactive approaches of the theatre pedagogy to education undoubtedly bring many advantages, such as: encouraging creativity, establishing a positive class climate, motivating students, holistic learning ... (Lešnik, 2017). But, it can only be used by trained teachers who understand the leverage of dramatic tension, are ready to take on various roles and to give up the traditional power ratios for the duration of the drama. To begin with, they need to understand the very concept of drama in education that is not tied to

(only) literature lessons, not intended for public performance, does not know the traditional division of actors and spectators - all participants are both - and combines pedagogical as well as artistic goals. At present, the field of theatre pedagogy in Slovenia develops primarily in the context of informal educational events, but in accordance with the current principles of experiential learning, it may soon become an important enrichment of classic lessons.

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