

D4LC

The better the drama, the better the learning

Pam Howell

It is a welcome development that the National Strategy embeds a greater expectation of teachers employing a range of drama strategies across the ages and phases. One of our project objectives has been to build upon this good foundation and offer a programme of support to enable colleagues to extend and enhance their confidence in using drama for learning and creativity so that they might move to a stage beyond the basic use of strategies such as 'hot seating', 'still image' and 'conscience alley' into whole class dramas. This has been especially important for our Key Stages 1 and 2 participants where the majority of teachers have had little in the way of previous ITT or CPD in drama. Some teachers found the process challenging, to say the least! However, the exciting and rewarding outcome for the D4LC team has been how brilliantly D4LC teachers have risen to that challenge and have taken to process drama rather like ducks to water. With the support of the project, they have been able to see the benefits for the children in their classes and have recognised how very far whole class drama goes towards fulfilling the spirit of current government priorities in their own practice:

'Excellent teaching gives children the life chances they deserve... Enjoyment is the birthright of every child. But the most powerful mix is the one that brings the two together. Children learn better when they are excited and engaged – but what excites and engages

them best is truly excellent teaching' (Excellence and enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools, DfES 2003)

And as part of this, they have also had the chance to see that drama can provide a powerful process through which their belief in creativity as fundamental to successful learning can be put into action.

D4LC and OfSTED inspections

One serendipitous product of D4LC has lent further support to this. By chance, several of the D4LC schools had OfSTED inspections during the course of the project and in each report, the lessons observed that included whole class drama were uniformly commended for the quality of teaching and learning in evidence – several being deemed 'outstanding'. These events gave the individual teachers and schools involved a great deal of confidence in what they were doing as their efforts were recognised in this crucial manner. Moreover, because of the D4LC support network, in which the project teachers regularly met to share experiences and good practice, the news of OfSTED approval spread through the group and provided a boost to confidence for everyone, including the D4LC consultants!

What the inspection visits happened upon were D4LC schools using drama across the curriculum, not just within literacy. This was, in effect, a snapshot of what was happening across the project generally

as another of our aims for D4LC was to promote how whole class drama enriches teaching and learning across the curriculum. In fact, within the action research focus schools, although a significant number chose research questions initially centred on drama's effect on aspects of development in literacy, many also chose to examine the potency of drama's role in a broader range of curriculum areas and still others evolved in this direction as the project unfolded.

Cross-curricular links

Through D4LC, teachers who had had relatively little prior experience of process drama had the opportunity to recognise its cross-curricular potential. Working with project consultants, and being supported by them in their own classrooms, helped participants to recognise the content-rich, layered nature of drama and gain confidence to capitalise on the multi-faceted learning opportunities embedded within a well-structured drama.

So, among other places, lessons took us on expeditions to the rain-forest and tropical islands, to other planets, to different periods of history and to fantasy worlds. Whilst stimulating writing might have been the prime motivation for some of the dramas, others used the drama to engage children in PHSE, history, creativity, problem-solving, scientific and mathematical understanding.

Moreover, the evident enjoyment and engagement with their learning demonstrated by the children gave

further encouragement to the project participants to develop their drama work, further.

Positive responses from all

The voice of the child as well as that of the teacher has been actively sought as part of D4LC. The delightful assertion by Ryan, aged 6, that 'drama helps me learn because it helps my brain', is typical and appears in various wordings in just about all of the pupil questionnaires.

Such positive feedback from the children, coupled with the teachers' own on-going evidence of enhanced pupil performance, was persuasive and many teachers, especially in the action research focus schools, were motivated to examine more deeply the way in which drama works, as the project unfolded. Suspending disbelief within the protection of 'make believe' allows risks to be taken, ideas to be mooted and discussed, consequences of actions to be revealed, decisions to be made, emotions to be explored and provides the mechanism for self-expression and imagination to flower.

D4LC teachers have embraced this process, recognising that working in role with children inside the drama means that they are working in creative partnership with them. As the project has unfolded they have developed their confidence in taking risks and allowing their classes the opportunity to take responsibility for helping to shape the direction of their own learning – with increased motivation towards learning and the enhanced learning outcomes generated by a sense of ownership, the happy consequence.

One reflection, it is the total D4LC package that has been the key to the success of the project. Any single element, whether the launch conference, the regular twilight sessions or the visits from a consultant or an AST, would have been beneficial to some degree, but in combination the rich mixture has provided

the greatest chance for on-going good practice to be embedded – both in the work of the individual teachers and also more generally within the participating schools. The numbers of schools committed to continuing and expanding drama practice in the light of D4LC is telling. The comment from one Head, exemplifies what is being put in place in a significant number of D4LC schools:

'It's now a priority target on the School Development and Improvement Plan with a budget and a timetable.'

D4LC and real evidence of success

Those of us who have been teaching drama for a long time could regale all who will listen from now until next Christmas about the effectiveness of drama for learning and creativity. We have a legion of examples from our collective experiences. However, anecdote is one thing, but in this outcomes dominated climate in which we work, evidence is altogether another and a further aim of D4LC has been to provide evidence to support our experiences and beliefs.

With 60 schools involved in the project, the external evaluation process has produced significant and substantial quantitative and qualitative data about the power of whole class process drama as a means to enhance learning and creativity. But, in the end, what is happening with individual teachers in their classrooms brings the reality of D4LC and the achievements of its participants home in a way that is tangible.

So, a return to the logs of two teachers, one with a Year 2 class and one with a Year 7 class, will provide a grounded place to conclude.

The Year 2 class had a number of challenging children and the teacher's research focused on investigating how drama might enable reluctant readers, especially boys.

At the end of her diary, the Year 2 teacher wrote:

Using drama is so rewarding and the benefits are immense. All the children, not just the reluctant boys, are now so motivated in their writing, they really see a purpose and are eager and enthusiastic. Drama can be used across so many different areas of the curriculum and turns the whole class, including day-dreamers, the worriers, the 'I can't do it' kids, into excited, enthusiastic and creative learners. I now have an amazingly confident, expressive and enthusiastic bunch of drama lovers! A class with drama is a happier place.

In her diary, the Year 7 teacher wrote:

In answer to the question 'How does drama influence children's creativity?' I would say 'significantly'.

In answer to the question 'does drama help children learn?' I would say 'Yes! Across the entire curriculum'. Teachers believe it, children believe it and OfSTED believe it too.

There are, of course, teachers who are still wary of drama and the implications for CPD are not to be underplayed. However, D4LC has proven a great success and generated a model that is sustainable and transferable. The hard evidence that the project research has produced reflects this and provides the foundation on which a D4LC teacher wrote:

**'Children love it.
Children learn with it.
Teachers should teach it.'**

National Drama is committed to providing the support for them to do just that.