

TEACHING DRAMA IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

NATALIE LOPES

Natalie Lopes examines the reasons why teaching Drama in primary school classrooms is so important. she writes about the benefits brought by Drama for students' learning and development as well as the joy it brings them...

I have a clear memory of my seven-year-old self running home from my first speech and drama lesson to set up my bedroom like the room in which my teacher taught. Sarah, from across the road, came over to play and I tried to give her the lesson I'd just experienced, much to her annoyance. From that moment on drama and performance became my strongest passion and I relished any opportunity for them.

We did very little drama at my primary school, but I had my weekly lessons outside of school. I studied Drama at high school and completed a Bachelor of Arts (Acting for the Stage and Screen) at university. When faced with the choice between Honours or a Diploma of Education (Secondary Drama) I chose the Dip Ed, knowing that, as a performer in Australia, I'd need a day job. I always felt teaching Drama would be more fulfilling than being a waitress. I never planned to be a full-time teacher; it would be suitable work whilst I was waiting for the phone to ring.

After five years as a casual teacher, I was offered a Drama RFF teaching role in a primary school. I decided to take it because securing part time work in the summer school holidays was becoming tiresome. Sixteen years later I am still at the same primary school teaching Drama.

When I was asked to write this article I immediately panicked, and my imposter syndrome reared its ugly head. I've taught Drama for many years, but what do I know really? I didn't plan to be a primary school teacher, and always thought I'd end up in a high school. I decided to talk to my students about it. 'Why do you think Drama is important in primary school?' I asked them. 'What does Drama mean to you?' Their answers helped inspire what I realised I could share with you.

'Drama is great because you can escape the real world and jump into a different reality.' – A Year 5 student

Drama allows its participants to pretend. Young children love to engage in make believe role playing when they play together, and drama is an extension of this natural ability. Drama is a chance to play, to imagine, to create characters and act like other people, to create ideas, stories, worlds. Playing roles also gives students the option to use the role as a shield, where they can let themselves go in a manner they wouldn't be able to if they weren't 'playing a role'.

'It lets me reach out and stretch my imagination and creativity.' – A Year 5 student

Drama is an imaginative experience where the students are constantly creating. When students improvise and devise their own performances, they are using critical and creative thinking to do so. The ability to spontaneously improvise and really 'be in the moment' is an amazing skill to develop. Students learn to resist the temptation to pre-plan what they will do when performing. One must surrender to the experience.

'It boosts your confidence and lets your emotions out with joy.' – A Year 6 student

More people in this world fear public speaking than death. This means, (I tell my students regularly) that more of the population would rather die than get up in front of an audience and perform. If you can do that confidently from a young age that is an excellent skill to have. Drama, when taught in a safe environment (and by safe, I mean a space where students feel they can explore and present ideas without ridicule and extreme judgment), helps to foster self-confidence in students. Each time they participate in a drama activity their

confidence grows. Students develop trust with the space, with each other and with the teacher. A safe creative environment cannot operate successfully without a level of trust. Students know they won't be 'wrong' if they participate. They can always grow and improve, but the space is a safe one to experiment and take risks. Drama also becomes a safe space to explore feelings and emotions that they might not feel comfortable expressing in real life.

'Drama helps me understand what characters are thinking.' – A Year 4 student

Drama helps students to develop empathy. By looking at situations from different characters' points of view, they begin to understand that all humans deal with life differently: that we are complex beings and that we respond to experiences with varying feelings and emotions. When we play characters, we put ourselves in other's shoes. Empathy and understanding grow because of this.

'I like working with others. You can show all your ideas and have fun.' – A Year 6 student

Drama is a group-based subject. In my classroom the students know that to devise in a group they must do the three C's – Collaborate, co-operate, and compromise.

Collaborate – they need to creatively work together as a team.

Co-operate – they need to cohesively work together as a team. Save the drama for the stage!

Compromise – they must meet in the middle with their ideas. This is often the trickiest skill to develop when you have several passionate group members who want to be in creative control of the idea.

Group Drama activities call on these skills to be in constant use and the students develop confidence in using them for group work. Group devising in Drama allows students to develop their ability to problem solve.

'You can be whoever you want to be.' – A Year 6 student

Drama is fun! Whether students are improvising and creating their own stories, playing Drama games, or

acting out scripts or texts others have written, Drama is a joyful experience that most children love. Drama is not competitive in the classroom and can be a subject students realise they enjoy and are good at, despite their ability in other areas. Drama is an organic subject - you don't need anything to do it except yourself. Drama is for everyone. Experiencing and participating in Drama is not just about rehearsing for a performance. That is, of course, one part of it - and a rewarding and fun part of it indeed – but the benefits of exploring drama in the classroom go much deeper than simply the ability to perform well. The confidence, creativity and imagination, problem solving skills and ability to work in a team are lifelong skills that benefit all students.

A specialist Drama teacher RFF role in a primary school is a privileged position and I can appreciate that not all schools can accommodate this. However, there are many ways that Drama can be incorporated into a primary school teacher's lesson.

These are a few suggestions for ways to use more Drama in your classroom.

As a physical activity often linked to PDHPE. There are numerous Drama games and activities that involve using your body. These are well suited as warm up games at the start of a PDHPE lesson. K-2 students enjoy games like Traffic Lights and Knights in the Museum whilst 3-6 students love Wolf in a House and Zombie Tag.

They can also be great as brain breaks in the classroom, for example, Knife and Fork, What Are You Doing? and can be utilised to get students using their bodies to help fire up their creativity and imagination when brainstorming.

As a literacy tool. Drama and literacy are intrinsically linked and the use of Drama when exploring texts in the classroom is a way of developing a deeper understanding whilst having fun. Having the chance to move and/or act like a character from a text can bring it to life. Simple storytelling games where students retell the events of a story can enhance the students understanding of the plot and characters. Improvising and acting out scenes that happen in the text, as well as creating scenes that do not happen in the text (for example, alternative

endings) provide wonderful opportunities for students to delve deeper into the text.

As a devising tool. Improvisation can be used to help plan stories and scripts. It is also a valuable tool when students are beginning group work in a range of subject areas. For example, students might improvise a story for the Drama activity of Typewriter where they narrate the story out loud. Later, they might use that story as a first draft for a piece of creative writing. A group of students might improvise a television commercial they are planning for the product/service they have created in a unit of work in HSIE.

For more suggestions of how to use Drama in the primary school classroom check out the following resources – [Act Ease](#) and [Arts Unit](#).

'Drama's just the best...yeah that's all.' – A Year 6 student

It's hard not to feel inspired about why Drama is important in the primary school classroom when you see the joy it brings the students. I hope this article has helped to highlight the importance and some of the many benefits of utilising Drama in your classroom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Natalie Lopes is a drama teacher at Stanmore Public School where she teaches RFF Drama to students in K-6. She also runs an after-school Drama program for students in Years 3-12. Natalie also works as an actor, writer and director in the theatre and TV industry, however the arrival of two small thespians of her own have meant less time for this area of her life in recent years.

REFERENCES

NSW Department of Education (2020) **Act Ease** <https://artsunit.nsw.edu.au/digital-resources/drama>

NSW Department of Education **Arts Unit**: <https://artsunit.nsw.edu.au/digital-resources/drama>