

# Using educational drama to improve outcomes for looked-after children

**Will Barlow**

## **Abstract**

Educational attainment has long been seen as a strength factor in building the resilience of young people. This paper builds upon the work of Stevens, Kirkpatrick and McNicol (2008) and suggests that Educational Drama could have a positive effect on the literacy attainment of looked-after children in Scotland.

## **Keywords**

educational drama, looked-after children

## **Corresponding author:**

Will Barlow, Drama Teacher,

## **Introduction**

Educational attainment has long been seen as a strength factor in building the resilience of young people. This paper builds upon the work of Stevens, Kirkpatrick and McNicol (2008) and suggests that Educational Drama could have a positive effect on the literacy attainment of looked-after children in Scotland. The paper highlights the difference in educational attainment between looked-after children and those who are not looked after. It offers an approach to try and redress this imbalance, using drama. A discussion takes place relating to the benefits of using an art-based approach for the engagement, motivation, confidence, resilience and literacy development of looked-after children. Educational drama uses a wide variety of dramatic conventions which enable children to commit to the dramatic experience. The paper discusses some of these conventions and the creation of an artistic ensemble. The ensemble, which can include the teacher or the residential practitioner, may provide a supportive environment which enables children to take risks while exploring language.

## **What is educational drama?**

Educational drama is a whole group activity that enables the facilitator and children to work together, as an ensemble, to improvise and create a drama. Therefore, educational drama does not usually require children to learn lines from a script, or work towards an end product of performance. This is because, unlike professional theatre, educational drama does not have an external audience. Instead, children are both the players and viewers of their work; they are their own audience.

As there is no script to work from, the facilitator will usually provide the ensemble with a starting point and generally work within the form of improvisation (Bowell and Heap, 2001). This enables young people to discover the story in real time responding to the continuing action of the unfolding narrative. When young people are fully involved with their learning, they are able to link their thoughts and feelings to the lesson content which results in emotional learning. Baldwin and Fleming (2003) believe that emotional learning is the best form of learning, as children are able to remember their experiences and the knowledge gained from their actions. Therefore, the educational drama event is a unique process that is individual to the ensemble.

### **Looked-after children and education**

The educational attainment of looked-after children is not as good as that of their peers who are not looked after (Condie et al., 2009; Scottish Government, 2009). The Scottish Executive (2003) indicated that too many looked-after children were being failed when it came to their education and it was unacceptable that six out of ten looked-after children left care at 16 and 17 years old without any qualifications. According to another Scottish Executive report (2004), the reading gap between looked-after children and those who are not looked after is small when these children are at primary school. The same cannot be said when both are compared at secondary year two (S2), as approximately 60 percent of non-looked-after children obtained the expected results in S2 reading tests, compared to under 20 percent of looked-after children.

In addition, looked-after children struggle to meet the Scottish Government's target of achieving a standard grade in English (Social Work Inspection Agency, 2006). In order to make the educational experience for all children equal, the Scottish Government (2008) asked educators to be as ambitious for looked-after children as any good parent would be for their child. However, Connelly and Chakrabarti (2008) and the Scottish Government (2009) reminds educators that their ambitions for looked-after children should be more than achieving attainment targets. Instead, looked-after children require support to achieve in the widest possible sense and educators should provide a curriculum that is thought-provoking and rewarding (Connelly and Chakrabarti, 2008).

Many looked-after children will have experienced some form of trauma and will be falling behind their peers academically (Moran, 2007). Connelly and Chakrabarti (2008) suggest that looked-after children are more likely to abscond and be expelled from school. Furthermore, by the age of 21 years old, approximately 13 percent of looked-after children fall within the 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' category and are more likely than the average population to have mental health problems, a criminal record and fewer qualifications (HMIE, 2006).

To support children affected by trauma, educators must provide an appropriate environment that develops academic skills and resilience (Moran, 2007). Newman and Blackburn (2002) believe that resilience is crucial in the development of a child that has suffered trauma or separation from their parents. One approach to developing resilience and promoting children's social, emotional and intellectual abilities is through the creative arts (Gilligan, 2007). This is because a play paradigm enables children to express

their thoughts and feelings more easily (Frost, 2005). Therefore, when a child is playing out situations which may be close to their own experience, it may offer health, education and social care practitioners the opportunity to observe and establish the cause of a child's behaviour (Smilan, 2009).

Another benefit of using educational drama with looked-after children is the possible promotion of their self-esteem and confidence. This is because educational drama requires the young people to develop their autonomy through creative decision-making and by offering ideas to the ensemble. As a result of this creative process they will experience positive feedback when their ideas come to fruition and they will reflect when their ideas are not as successful. Maclean (2003) believes autonomous children understand that it is acceptable to make mistakes and learn from them, as this develops an awareness of emotions and behaviour.

### **The benefits of an arts-based approach to literacy**

According to the Scottish Executive (2008), literacy is the procurement of skills that a person requires in order for them to connect completely with society and education. Stevens et al. (2008) would seem to suggest that the children were helped to acquire some literacy skills through the arts-based activity of storytelling. Montgomery and Ferguson (1999) suggest a traditional approach to literacy tuition 'does little to promote learning' (p.19). In addition, Lambirth (2005) indicates that children do not learn well if they are treated simply as recipients of information. With this in mind, educators who use a traditional didactic style may be disenfranchising children for whom a more arts-based approach to learning would be beneficial (Baldwin and Fleming, 2003).

Stevens et al. (2008) highlighted that literacy tuition need not be a boring task. Indeed, engaging looked-after children in learning through arts-based activities is highlighted by the Scottish Government (2009) as a pedagogical approach that has a positive impact on their educational attainment and motivation. The motivation of children in residential units was clearly not a problem for the storytellers described by Stevens et al. (2008) as they were reported to have enjoyed and gained socially and academically from participating in storytelling.

Stevens et al. (2008) challenges the preconceived notions of literacy tuition as more than reading and writing by engaging the pupils in oral literacy. As such, the children were able to develop their understanding of language and story structure by listening to the stories told and constructing and telling their own stories. This offered children a voice in influencing their education by creating their stories on their chosen themes. Working in this manner addresses the recommendations of Neelands, Booth and Ziegler (1993) and Wortham (2008) who believe that literacy tuition should have a greater emphasis on social interaction than focusing solely on formal reading and writing tasks. Indeed, it is this sense of play that Heath (2004) believes increases children's engagement with the educational process and develops their language skills.

Connelly et al. (2008) believe that an informal pedagogical approach such as that reported by Stevens et al. (2008) can develop literacy and resilience skills in looked-after children, as can be seen in the following quotation from a looked-after child:

Using activities that a person likes is the best way to educate them. I like drama and you could do all sorts of things connected to drama, like connecting it to English. People find school really boring but people learn more when they are having fun...

(Connolly et al., 2008, p46).

Children may not realise that they are explicitly developing their literacy skills during drama work, as the literacy tuition is disguised in the practical discovery of the story (Ackroyd, 2000). This may be beneficial when working with looked-after children as it could increase their engagement with the education process while, at the same time, helping them with their literacy skills. This seems to be the case with the study by Safford, O'Sullivan and Barrs (2004) with marginalised boys who concluded that drama was a key pedagogical approach in the attainment of literacy. They believed that educational drama makes learning accessible and engaging for boys who are disinterested in formal education processes. In addition, McMaster (1998) believes that educational drama is a key vehicle for teachers of literacy, as it one of only a handful of pedagogical approaches that develops every feature of literacy progression.

### **Educational drama - A supportive learning environment**

Stevens et al. (2008) found that the children in their research developed a creative and emotional attachment to storytelling, by linking their personal experiences to the narrative. A similar attachment could be achieved by using educational drama, as this enables children to draw upon past experiences in order to shape their fiction. This may empower children to begin to make sense of their past, which could then lead to a dramatisation of their feelings (Smilan, 2009). As children begin to develop an understanding of one another's experiences, the ensemble may begin to develop a sense of trust within a supportive learning environment. It is this type of environment that Lowman (1984) believes empowers children to take risks. The same creative risk-taking could be achieved through educational drama. For example when children are participating in role-play, they assume the attitudes and beliefs of a set role. This portrayal offers children the opportunity to develop a range of languages and emotions which they may not usually use (Grainger, 2005). As such, when children are in role they are investing emotionally and creatively in the endeavour and taking risks to affect the emotions of others (Baldwin and Fleming, 2003). Neelands (2009) believes this model of ensemble working shows children how to act in the drama classroom and helps shape their social skills in the wider world. This development of social skills is illustrated by Vander Ven's (1999) work on activity theory. Vander Ven (1999) suggests that social and personal skills can be developed in an informal learning environment centred on fun and social interaction, as opposed to a more traditional didactic form of learning.

Stevens et al. (2008) found that storytelling helped to develop the relationships between the children and the adults in the project. Educational drama also enables the teacher,

carer and young person to develop a positive working relationship by working together sharing in the development of their fiction.

When the children have accepted the fictional world together, it is an ideal time for the teacher or carer to enter into the drama (Baldwin & Fleming, 2003). The adults may offer the children a structured approach to learning and help them deal with past traumas while, at the same time, modelling verbal and non-verbal communication (Frost, Wortham and Reifel, 2007). Thus, when a child and teacher or carer develops their relationship into one of trust and respect, an emotional attachment between the two is formed. Maclean (2003) indicates that a child may begin to trust a person when he/she experiences an individual who is dependable, respectful and trustworthy.

A structured approach which can be used to develop this trust is the drama convention of 'teacher-in-role'. When a facilitator uses teacher-in-role they are able to enter the fictional world with the children. By entering the fiction it shows the children that the facilitator is interested and accepts the drama that has been created, while at the same time challenging them to develop their story further. This results in the children viewing the facilitator as a 'co-artist' who is committed to the drama which, in turn, increases their commitment to the experience (Prendiville and Toye, 2007).

McNaughton (1997) found using 'teacher-in-role' developed a rapport with children that would not usually be expected in the traditional setting. McIntyre (1973) suggests that when children are affiliated with an adult that they can depend on and relate to, they become less anxious. This may be beneficial when working with looked-after children as when the children see the teacher or carer working alongside them in role, it may encourage them to invest in the learning and teaching and to discover new possibilities for their relationship.

However, adults must be careful, when working alongside children, to ensure that they do not over-structure the work. This may make the children feel that they are no longer in control of the action and the telling of the story. If this occurs, children may disengage from the process and see the adult as someone who is telling them what to do.

## **Developing educational resilience through educational drama**

### ***A. Reading***

Grainger (2005) indicates that when the starting point for educational drama is textual, it allows the participants greater access to the story as they are more directly involved in the interpretation and reflection of the piece. When using a story as a stimulus, a simple drama activity would be to rehearse the characters and re-enact the plot in the manner that has been chosen by the author. However, in doing this re-enactment the greater potential for the children's ownership of the story may be missed. This is because there is so much that is omitted in stories that the author has deemed to be irrelevant to the plot. These omissions may be an aspect of the story that children wish to investigate further - it is after all their story. Baldwin & Fleming (2003) describe this as co-authorship.

With co-authorship, the participants can collectively delve into the story, or springboard away from it, in any way that offers the most dramatic potential for them. It is this ability to manoeuvre between the real and fictional world that enables children to develop a greater understanding of the structures of a story (Grainger, 2005). Teachers and carers can support children's co-authorship in educational drama by helping them develop an understanding of the characters, place and time.

### ***B. Writing***

Educational drama may offer children a purpose for writing by engaging them in discussions, both in and out of role, enabling them to rehearse and present their thoughts and feelings in an open and supportive environment. However, the safety net of the fictional world also enables children to express their thoughts and feelings when writing. Booth & Roswell (2007) demonstrated that good writing only takes place when the participants write about something that is meaningful to them.

In order for the writing experience to be meaningful, children must have a purpose for writing. Neelands et al. (1993) propose that when children write in response to a personal dramatic experience, their understanding of literacy devices such as 'genre, register and audience' increases (p.9). Educational drama provides a link between story and literacy composition. This may be because children are able to go beyond the narrative structure and create their own interpretations. Therefore, when children are actively engaged in the dramatic process they create a variety of potential writing activities by listening and responding to the views of others (Grainger, 2005). Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (2003) indicates that when children are given enough time for thinking, discussion, exploration and reflection in their learning, literacy standards usually improve. Reflecting on the views of others may help children form their own opinions and feelings about characters and situations. For example, when a child is participating in educational drama, they are continually being exposed to situations which require them to discuss differing characters' beliefs and, as a result, their own opinions. Forming these opinions enables children to write from a standpoint of experience and knowledge (Grainger, 2005).

A drama convention which may enable children to express their experiences is 'writing-in-role'. When children use this convention they are writing from the point of view of the character. This convention could enable the children to describe their experience of a situation when in role, or reflect on their feelings and opinions of a past event in the drama. Using this technique may develop their understanding of a character's thought process (Goodwin, 2004). Therefore, 'writing-in-role' may provide a base from which their thought processes can develop and offer time to reflect on the process of writing (Grainger, 2005).

McNaughton (1997) discovered that children who participated in educational drama wrote more, increased their vocabulary and had a greater empathy for the characters than the second group who only discussed the dramatic situations. This is evident when you ask a child to write 'as if', without creating a fictional world for him or her to work from. The child may find this difficult as he or she may have no experience of the subject. When this

occurs a child may begin to lose interest, behavioural problems may begin to surface and their confidence may diminish.

### *C. Speaking and listening*

Bird and Akerman (2005) indicate that drama develops the speaking and listening skills of children and has the possibility to motivate many at-risk people to learn. This may be due to the children having ownership of the drama and as a result an interest in resolving the problems that arise in the action. Moreover, as the story is continually changing, children must listen and adapt to the situation that they find themselves in. They must be able to discuss, respond and offer ideas to others in order for the drama to continue. If they do not listen to the ongoing conversations, they will not be able to follow the storyline of the drama. Contributing to the conversations of the drama, whether in role or not, may require children to adapt their voice and language (Baldwin and Fleming 2003). For instance, when a child is in role as a toddler, the rest of the ensemble would have to change their voice and language in order for the toddler to understand what is being said. In doing so, children are able to maintain the fictional world of the roles and the situation. Therefore, children are continually experimenting with their language and voice to develop a greater understanding of the character's stance (Baldwin and Fleming, 2003).

Another example of a drama convention which can increase a child's understanding of a character's point of view is 'hot seating'. Hot seating is essentially a role-taking activity. When in role the child is able to adjust his or her register and language to suit the role (Baldwin and Fleming, 2003). By changing his or her voice and language to suit the role, the child has to think as the character. The child enters the space in role and is questioned by the other children on anything ranging from likes and dislikes to fundamental insights to the character's psyche. The child in the hot seat may gain a greater understanding and emotional attachment to the role as he or she has to spontaneously improvise and respond as if the child were the character. Moreover, the children asking the questions develop an understanding of the character's thought process by listening to the responses of the child in the hot seat. Therefore, hot seating provides children with the opportunity to discuss a variety of viewpoints as a group.

### **Final points**

Developing the educational resilience of looked-after children requires imaginative interventions. In particular, literacy tuition for looked-after children should move away from the more traditional decontextualisation approach, where children sit and listen, and instead move towards a paradigm of active learning. All too often, looked-after children are excluded from mainstream education because they feel that they have little choice in how to participate in their own education. If educators and carers use educational drama with looked-after children, they will be able to offer a safe purposeful environment. This environment enables children to work together, sharing in the learning experience and promoting creative risk-taking.

The conventions used in educational drama are not difficult to incorporate into practice. Indeed, as a practitioner you may be using some already and reaping the rewards of doing

so. This paper is addressed to educators and carers not using educational drama strategies. Using techniques such as educational drama is nothing to be scared of. For example, the idea of children getting up from behind their desks, talking over one another and crawling under tables shouting 'Sir, can I show you around my cave' could be daunting to some; but these very experiences may live with a child forever. Educators and carers should strive to create learning environments in the class and in the residential house that provide children with the opportunity to experiment and explore their creativity.

When adults facilitate and participate in a shared fiction they are accepting the pretence created by the children by becoming a co-artist. With the adult assuming a role as a co-artist he or she is able to form a special type of relationship with the children built on mutual creativity, respect and trust. Moreover, due to the reflective nature of techniques such as educational drama, the adult is also able to reflect on the process with the children by experiencing the same situations as they do. Through reflection, practitioners may begin to view the child in a different light.

Educators and carers of looked-after children may wish to try some of the techniques mentioned in this paper. Do not be frightened to become involved in the action as the children will value your creativity which will help to develop the story. The next time you read a story with the children, ask them to recreate the set of a scene from the story, or to create three tableaux of the most important aspects of the character's life as a starting point for continued exploration. Encourage children to explore characters and create their own stories from a stimulus. In doing so, children are able to view themselves as actors who are in charge of the dramatic process. This should be promoted at all times, and you should support any drama-related written tasks (for example, writing a diary entry as a character or a news report of an important event in the story). This approach can be engaging and fun for all participants - including teachers and carers.

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