



Seeds Creative

Reflective Practice Projects

Using early years drama to give students ownership, agency, and opportunities to participate in decision making and expand creativity.

Katie Lovell



Contents

Introduction	3
Background/rationale	4
How did you carry out the project?	5
Findings	6
Conclusion	9
Bibliography	10



Introduction

I hope this project helps to open up a discussion about the different ways in which we can use drama and creative play to give students more ownership, agency and help expand their creativity. I also hope it leads to an even wider discussion on the importance of creative work for children. I have been teaching drama, dance, and singing to early years students for over 15 years and love hearing their ideas and input when working on a project. I like to think I encourage each student to show their strengths. Allowing the children to make decisions about the direction of a project can be challenging for the teacher at times, but I believe it is vital for the student's skill development. As my project progressed and I spoke to the other practitioners, the conversation evolved into a wider discussion about the importance of creativity, the arts, and live theatre.

Below is a write up discussing the project. Evidence and details from my interviews can be found in the soundcloud file. Happy listening.



Background/rationale

Having taught drama and musical theatre to children of all ages, especially 4-7 years old, there has never been any doubt in my mind that this creative play is essential to their development. I am always amazed with the ideas that students come up with when they're given the opportunity to take charge and make choices. Approaching drama in early years using the principles of improvisation - not blocking ideas but saying 'yes and' - gives teachers the ability to guide the student and in turn gives the students the opportunity to have ownership of their work.

I wanted to explore this idea of helping children grow their creativity and decision-making powers using drama. I spoke to other practitioners to find out what their experiences with this idea were, and what tools and techniques they use to implement this practice. After the exceptional year we've all just had, I also wanted to hear the practitioner's thoughts on the importance of drama/creative education. How do we, as educators, ensure the arts don't get pushed aside and theatre (and other art forms) remain accessible. The other practitioners and I use the term creativity throughout this project. It's worth mentioning that creativity isn't easily definable and can mean different things to different people. I am firmly in the camp that almost anything can be creative, although some people place stricter boundaries around this term.



How did you carry out the project?

- 1) The European Journal of Social Behavioural Sciences - "Evaluating students' agency and development of ownership in a collaborative playmaking project".
- 2) Science Direct, Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki – "Promoting Creativity in Teaching Drama" Anna Lehtonena , Miia Kaasinena , Mirja Karjalainen-Väkevää, Tapio Toivanena
- 3) I interviewed 4 other teacher/practitioners to find out what their experiences were using drama to give early years ownership, decision making powers and to promote creativity. I also talked to them about the value of drama in education and the importance of live theatre.
- 4) I reflected on my own early years teaching experiences and observations.

I interviewed two teachers with drama backgrounds and training who now teach early years in mainstream school, as well as two arts practitioners with over 15 years teaching experience. All participants opted in to be interviewed and had the option to withdraw until the completion of this project.



Findings

What did you learn?

Through research and interviews I learned that most experienced arts practitioners plan their lessons in a way that allows for student input and ownership, which reflected my personal teaching experience. One of the practitioners I spoke to teaches predominantly musical theatre, which is all about precision, but she still finds a way to include exercises where the students are bringing their own ideas and work to the class.

The articles from the University of Helsinki implied that when teachers tried to control the creative process too much, the lesson was unsuccessful. For successful creative lessons to succeed, teachers need to be there to guide and shape the project but must also be willing to hand over control to the students. When encouraging students to think creatively and take ownership of their work, teachers have to be innovative with their own processes as well as flexible and sensitive to the needs of the project. *“By resistance and critical attitude the students tested their power and possibilities to influence in the project. Simultaneously the students’ ownership strengthened and initiative and responsibility taking increased. Conducting an ensemble in creating demanded a special pedagogical orientation: readiness for an open dialogue with students, transformation of the teacher’s role and a willingness to adjust to the process of learning.”*

“When teaching creatively, a teacher should utilize the rules of improvisation by living in the moment and acting spontaneously. While a teacher may have planned a drama lesson in a certain manner, a creative teacher has the courage to take ideas that have been put forward by the pupils during the lesson and change the lesson to finish in another way.”

Another of the teachers I spoke to comes from a creative background and now teaches reception to year 2 in a mainstream school. Interestingly he talked about not necessarily putting boundaries or restrictions on the creative content or creative play that the students developed, but that the structure or boundaries come from how we behave towards each other. When it comes to performance, the theatrical rituals that students are expected to follow - sitting quietly and watching each other’s work, giving a round of applause at the end - are the elements that give the lessons structure and discipline.

Every single one of the practitioners I spoke to supported the idea that when students are given more ownership of a project, and when their ideas shape the project, they are more engaged in the class and their performance and take a huge amount of pride in the finished



product. This was reported across the board and is good evidence that having some control, autonomy and input into their own creative work is hugely beneficial to the students' confidence. The two mainstream schoolteachers I spoke to told me that this type of child led creative work also helps students to think abstractly and understand abstract concepts. They both discussed how important this work is to children's development and how it feeds into language and numeracy.

Most online teaching has been reduced to core subjects, and I know that a lot of teachers are worried that arts subjects may be scaled back even further when in-person classes resume and the government puts a huge amount of emphasis on 'catching up'. In my interview with Laura Fitzsimons, she talked about the lack of support for the arts, not just in funding, but from the school community (other teachers and parents), as well as not having the time available to devote to it. One of my other interviewees, Joe, brought up a great point about teacher confidence when it comes to teaching arts subjects, a lot of teachers don't feel they have the tools or training to teach drama, art, or music in the classroom. Because of this lack of training, some teachers struggle to see the importance of those subjects. These conversations really highlighted some of the different barriers that need to be addressed in order for the arts to thrive in an education setting. I believe accessibility to the arts is vital and every single one of the practitioners I spoke to felt the same. The research above backs up the idea that students aren't necessarily learning 'how to be an actor' when they take part in a drama class, but are learning a host of new skills such as communication, language exploration, teamwork, responsibility and discipline. The Cultural Learning Alliance has published their research findings and the evidence for cultural learning being a necessity is overwhelming. They found that participation in arts activities can increase children's cognitive ability by 17%. As practitioners and champions of the arts, we need to be taking these statistics to school boards and governments bodies to ensure that arts education is not just an 'extra' but a priority. There also has to be an argument to teach, learn, practice, art for arts own sake. Laura put it beautifully during our interview, so I'm just going to quote her here:

"There's a section of the curriculum called 'the arts' and it'll be like, you know, you could roleplay being The Big Bad Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood. And you go, yep okay, brilliant, great, but it's all about how that ties into literacy, rather than drama for the sake of drama or dance for the sake of dance. Because, we recognise that they're vital skills that children can learn that are transferable. I now know as an adult, everything I learned in the arts as a child is transferable to me being a teacher, or being a wedding celebrant, or just being an adult in the world being able to communicate with people."



As this project progressed, the importance of creativity for early years, in all its forms, became increasingly clear. All the practitioners I interviewed reiterated my own views about the progress students make when participating in drama/creative play. Each and every one of us could think of a student who transformed before our eyes during a session and the value of creative practices cannot underestimated.

Some different exercises the practitioners include to help to allow more for more autonomy or decision making are:

- 1) Helicopter Stories.
- 2) Rhythm and Music Improvisation.
- 3) Storytelling exercises acting out stories and building on them.
- 4) Improvisation exercises using a premise.



Conclusion

How might this impact on your professional practice?

For me, this project has driven home the importance of student led projects. I was interested in this topic as I try to approach my teaching in a way that gives students creative input, but I will now aim to increase this even further.

Being flexible with plans and ideas is crucial to how successful a class or project is from the students' point of view, and that should be at the heart of any arts practitioners work. The opportunity for a class or project to be taken in a different direction as a result of student input is what makes teaching drama so exciting. Within my practice, I aim to implement improvisational tools further to support my student's creative work.

What are the limitations of this investigation?

The interviews I conducted were with people who all have a huge passion for the arts, believe in it as an education tool, and will continue to teach drama and creative play going forward. I did not talk to anyone who is reticent towards the arts or arts teaching in regard to how important they think this type of work is.

This project was also done while covid restrictions were in place, so while I was able to draw on previous projects and experience, I was not able to put these ideas into practice in the classroom in order to analyse a specific project in action.

Have you identified any aspects of this enquiry that would be interesting to explore further?

I think it would be beneficial to expand on this research, especially the discussions I had with the two schoolteachers, to find out in more detail how the arts and creative work is being used in main stream classrooms. I'd love to speak to teachers who don't teach arts subjects to discuss their views on the importance of creativity within an academic framework.



Bibliography

- Science Direct, Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki – “Promoting Creativity in Teaching Drama” Anna Lehtonena , Miia Kaasinena , Mirja Karjalainen-Väkevää, Tapio Toivanena
- The European Journal of Social Behavioural Sciences - “Evaluating students’ agency and development of ownership in a collaborative playmaking project”.

Special Thanks

Huge thanks go out to Jenna Dykes-Busby, Joseph Davies, Samantha Giffard and Laura Fitzsimons for agreeing to be interviewed for this project.

Listen to the edited version of all four interviews here:

<https://soundcloud.com/k-lovell/seeds-creative-final-edited-interviews/s-9LuLL6cp2u6>