



Have a think about it: drama for mental agility

Dramatic learning in the primary school
Shirley Brice Heath & Shelby Wolf



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The series *Dramatic learning in the primary school* tells some of the many stories of partnerships that have increased school children's access to creative learning opportunities in 2003 and 2004. Oral language, strategic thinking and dramatic literacies were the focus of the research on which this series of booklets is based. The on-going study results from the collaboration of Creative Partnerships Durham Sunderland, teachers from Bexhill Primary School, and scholars Shirley Brice Heath and Shelby Wolf, supported through Stanford University (USA) and Brown University (USA).

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Shirley Brice Heath and Shelby Wolf
Dramatic learning in the primary school

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Have a think about it: drama for mental agility.
It's up to you: drama for emotional health.
What could happen if? drama for learning from others.
A way of working: teachers in drama education.

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Drama for mental agility

Think of this. Two friends – a bear and a bird – see a rainbow. The bear has never seen one before and worries that the sky is on fire. The bird knows what it is but believes there’s a pot of gold to be found at the end of it. They rush off towards the rainbow and bear takes his pot, fills it with water, and splashes the spectrum, which fades away. Meanwhile, the bird finds golden honey in a nearby tree, and bear hungrily fills his now-empty pot. The two friends share a fine dinner of honey cakes, and then set out for a relaxing boat ride where they sit for a long time, thinking. Little Bird finally speaks: “So it was a rainbow, and I found the pot of gold.” But Bear disagrees, “Oh no, it wasn’t. It was a sky fire... and I put it out” (QCA, 1999).

Now think about this. Faced with this story as part of their Key Stage 1 testing, a group of seven-year-olds sit nibbling on the ends of their pencils, thinking about the questions before them. Among the fourteen questions for the story – both short answer and multiple choice – some answers are to be found directly in the text, but a few ask the children to *think like the characters*. One question asks “Why do you think that Bear filled the pot with water?” Another queries: “Why do you think the friends were quiet for a long time?” The children sit pondering, stymied by such questions. And when they finally write down their thoughts, their answers often miss the mark.

Yet hitting the mark on national curriculum tests is critical for the academic futures of children. Described as “tests of attainment” (QCA, 2003a), they measure children’s progress in what they have learned in the national curriculum. According to a QCA Fact Sheet (2003b) on the implications of Key Stage 1 English, the progression of children’s insight into characters is directly linked to their final score:

The progression of children's insight into characters is directly linked to their final Key Stage test score.

- Level 2C: Identify main characters and what they are doing in narrative texts.
- Level 2B: Search sections of narrative and non narrative texts to locate specific details.
- Level 2A: Make accurate inferences from narrative texts, particularly in relation to characters' actions, speech, and feelings.
- Level 3: Find evidence in the text to support their answers, rather than relying on their own experience. Develop an understanding of motivation and cause and effect in narrative writing.

But making accurate inferences and understanding motivation as well as cause and effect are not easy tasks for a seven-year-old. Furthermore, it's not a straightforward task for teachers to help their children make the mental shift to think outside of their own experience and see into the thinking of others, particularly characters on the page. Moreover, to be able to think inside the head of a literary character requires *empathy*, an emotional identification based on the ability to compare one's own experiences with those described in the text. Though the Fact Sheet suggests that children not *rely on* their experiences, they must still be able to draw on what they have felt and done under circumstances similar to those of the story (see more on empathy in *It's up to you: drama for emotional health*, another booklet in this series).

At Bexhill Primary School in Sunderland, one group of teachers realised the importance of experience gained through drama for

improving children's readiness for full participation in the curriculum and in their tests. At Bexhill, the arts have always held high priority. The school achieved an Artsmark Silver award in 2003. Teachers and community members talk of their school as being particularly devoted to music; it is not unusual to hear teachers suggest "the 'four Rs' form the bedrock of our teaching – Reading, wRiting, aRithmetic and Rhythm." However, when Bexhill Primary School began working in collaboration with Creative Partnerships in 2002, they decided to add drama in a strong and meaningful way to the learning life of their school. School staff saw their choice as supporting the school's "focus on children's speaking and listening skills." Teachers particularly wanted their children to "think creatively as well as develop confidence in presenting their ideas."

The children of Bexhill come to school each day from the surrounding housing estates. Built in the early sixties and recently refurbished, the rows of brick houses are separated from the road with small gardens. While the area is marked by high unemployment, with percentages of children eligible for free school meals ranging between 35 and 50%, each school day begins as mums and dads drop off the youngest children, and older pupils walk from the nearby streets, enter the school building, and settle into their classrooms on their own. The entrance to the school and the corridor that leads to the front office are filled with so many owls you think you've entered Harry Potter's Hogwarts. The owls appear in myriad forms – stuffed toys, figurines, portraits, and postcards collected for more than the last decade. The owl – which all the children sport on their school sweatshirts – is the chosen mascot for Bexhill, for the school motto is "Wisdom Through Learning."

Part of Bexhill's wisdom is its willingness to be innovative in its approach to delivering the curriculum. Few teachers today would think about drama when preparing their pupils for national tests. Yet Key Stage 1 teacher, Lesley Watson, argues that drama can be instrumental in helping her children see into the intentions of others:

When the question is “Why do you think Bear filled the pot?” they would think, “Why would I fill the pot? It must be for a drink.” And when they say, “Why are Bear and Bird quiet?” they would say, “Well, they’re probably tired. You know, they’ve had a hard day. Or they didn’t want to make a noise.” Because that’s why *they* would be quiet. But in drama you are able to lift yourself up and imagine you’re that person and see how everything else must seem in a different light. That’s what the drama side of it would do for our kids – to help them be able to put themselves in that situation.

Many advocates of drama in education put forward such opportunities for their value in providing emotional release, entertaining, or giving children some kind of “extra” in terms of understanding texts, life situations, or other cultures. These are all very positive impacts, values, and purposes of drama. However, this booklet argues that extended participation in the development, production, and performance of drama also comes as close as any activity to being essential for language and the development of mental agility. Drama ensures roles that give young players practice in critical academic skills; they must learn to think quickly, see the world through the eyes of others, and integrate an array of different types of information into one’s character.

Teachers who read the support materials for the Key Stage 1, 2, and 3 tests in English, Mathematics, and Science are familiar with the many calls in these materials for “mental agility.” Defined as the ability to think flexibly and anticipate twists and turns in problems, this characteristic is necessary for every stage of testing and across all subject areas. Preparation for this kind of mental work requires extensive oral practice in real situations – attending to current details, thinking ahead about what could happen, and seeing the relationship of information and incidents along the way to ultimate outcomes. The work of creating ideas, scripting words, developing

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movement, and playing out roles ensures the building of “habits of mind” (Perkins, 1981) that move across situations, subject areas, and types of testing.

While drama is applicable to all subject areas, in this booklet we concentrate on the very special ways in which drama connected the children of Bexhill to texts in their reading and writing. Four teachers – Lesley Watson, Linda Nesbitt, Clare Moonie, and Rachael Dawson – encouraged by their Creative Partnerships School Co-ordinator Joy Lowther (appointed Headteacher in September, 2004) – formed a Teacher Research Team (TRT). Shelby Wolf, the on-site researcher, as well as numerous drama-based artists who came into the school for short-term residencies, helped the Bexhill team members. During the months from late spring 2003 through the school year of 2003 – 2004, some of these professional artists worked with children for as long as several months to produce a script and piece of theatre to be performed for the school and local community. The TRT took these experiences and brought as much as possible of the creative and critical ways of thinking within drama into their own classrooms as well as their after-school Drama Clubs. The TRT concentrated on building opportunities for children to develop fluency in the kinds of language most effectively used for problem-finding and problem-solving.



Stepping back to think about language learning

Two kinds of language ability are fundamental to what it means to be human: receptive and productive. Receptive abilities are those that support the facility to understand, interpret, remember, and act on what one hears. Listening is therefore the first and foremost language skill that infants and toddlers must learn. Whether lying in the cot or crawling on the bedroom floor, very young children “pick up” sounds in the environment. Until about nine months of age, they can hear and distinguish all the sounds that humans are capable of making. The portion of the brain dedicated to language perception is “open” to all sounds. By the time the child reaches the first birthday, the young potential speaker has begun to sort out, for special attention in listening, only those sounds of the surrounding language(s). This means that children now hear “selectively,” working their attention so as to attend most vigorously to the most frequent sounds of the environment.

Listening goes on seemingly without any direct effort, but this does not mean that the brain is not fully engaged. Linguists have placed audio recorders in the cots of young children to catch their babbling as they go off to sleep. Often children repeat and replay, as though they are rehearsing, the sounds, phrases, and sentences they have heard around them during the day. We know that they repeat lots of expressions carrying information far in advance of what they can understand. But they have clearly been “listening” and remembering and are now, as they drift off into sleep, replaying and “practising” what they have heard. In a way, they are practising their lines, just as actors do, no doubt, as they too slip off into sleep each night.

Because children need practice in talking, adults have to become their conversational partners.

All of this preparation through listening works constantly to help children become “productive” with language. This means that they learn to talk and eventually to write, illustrate, and create language. Becoming a producer of language means moving from single words and phrases to sentences and idioms, understanding genres such as jokes and stories, and taking active roles in conversation.

Young children often begin to talk by naming people, objects, and events. But they soon move on in their expression to say what they want to happen. They insert action and emotions; “Daddy sad?” or “cake all gone” or “Clara up” become their questions, statements, or commands. But they go on to form sentences and put these together to comment on the world around them and to imitate characters they may see in television programmes or know within their own families. Often, even when adults cannot understand the precise words of a young child, they know from hearing the intonation and seeing gestures or posture just who is being imitated.

Because children need practice in talking, adults have to become their conversational partners. Any practice in playing the role of “other” in conversation prepares children for school, where one person – the teacher – addresses the group as partner in a conversation – often called discussion. Within the classroom, children have to learn to listen, even when they are not the only person being addressed by others. They have to learn to eavesdrop, tune in, remember, and rethink what they hear going on around them in language.

Yet they must also learn the special kinds of listening that classrooms require, particularly in discussion. Teachers ask questions, invite comments, and open up opportunities for children to contribute their ideas to the topic at hand. Learning to participate in discussion depends in large part on having had hours of practice in being one of the partners in conversations. In addition, to be

If I was a poet, I would want to read it so kids liked it.

strong classroom citizens and effective participants, children have other kinds of listening and speaking they must learn. They need to listen to stories read aloud to follow the sequence of plot. They need to note the messages in stories and identify themes. They must attend to the nuances of stylistic devices – simile, metaphor, imagery, hyperbole, symbolism, as well as puns and wordplay. They need to hear the devices of sound – alliteration, rhythm, and even onomatopoeia – where words actually sound like their meanings. And they need to hear that the ways in which we read the words can make a difference to the listener.

At the start of her Year Two class, Linda Nesbitt taught her children several patterns in poetry – “taking account of punctuation and noticing sound patterns (such as rhymes, rhythms, alliteration) as well as listening for forms of presentation, by looking for clues in the poems.” However, on a day in early September, Linda read her children a poem in a complete monotone, ignoring punctuation and line structure. Then she slyly asked:

Linda: Did you enjoy that?

Gareth: That was boring, Miss.

Chorus: (Laughter!)

Linda: (Chuckling) Well! Thanks, Gareth! I read the words on the page, the words the poet has written.

Gareth: But I bet he wanted it to be interesting or funny.

Nathan: Yes, if I was a poet, I would want to read it so kids liked it.

Chorus: (Lots of nods)

Abbie: I think you should read it again. Read it bumpy.

Linda: Bumpy? What do you mean?

Abbie: Up and down. Your voice, if you make your voice go up and down, it will be interesting. Remember to look for clues!

Linda: Do you think that would make a difference?

Courtney: Yes! Remember the clues.

Linda: (After rereading the poem in a more animated way, varying intonation and expression.) Was that any better?

Joe: Yeah! Much better.

Linda: Who can tell me anything they liked or thought was better.

Rebecca: It sounded better, and it was easier to understand. Your voice was better. It went up and down like you understood the words.

Linda: So, I understood the meaning – what the poet meant and how he wanted it read?

Emma: Yes.

Abbie: Yes, you made it bumpy.

Gareth: But bumpy is not always good. Remember when we read – Sometimes you say we sound like robots like B.e.n. Biggins L.oo.k.ed i.n. the b.o.x. Well, that's not good.

Abbie: But bumpy makes it interesting.

Linda: I know what Gareth is getting at. Bumpy can sound a bit like a robot. But Abbie is right as well because you need to change your voice. I know what she means, but maybe bumpy isn't the best word.

Gareth: (Miming a car stalling and bumping along the road.) If you go up and down you could be bouncy! That might be a good word.

Linda: That's brilliant, Gareth! What do you think, Abbie? Is bouncy a good way to describe what you meant?

Abbie: Yes! Bouncy is good reading, bumpy is like a robot.

Here the children reflect their analysis of how *intonation* and *pace* work. The up-and-down the children enjoy provides the melodic rhythm, and variations denote special points of interest as well as whether or not something is a statement or a question. They have been good listeners, and they recognise when reading is boring. As Nathan insisted, "If I was a poet, I would want to read it so kids liked it." Even in the few short weeks they have been in school this year, they had become accustomed to hearing written words "performed" – played for the roles they have within the poem, story, or debate. But we must note that they have also learned to perform their own spoken words. "Bumpy" and "bouncy" jump in our minds as we listen to their talk. We hear the animation of these adjectives, and we learn

to see into their meanings through the comparisons the children make to robots and cars.

The children's very active and engaged discussion reminds us that how we think about children's learning has changed substantially over the years. As drama educator, Betty Jane Wagner (1998), suggests:

... children are no longer described as Dickens' schoolmaster Gradgrind saw them: 'little vessels... ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.' Now there is a widespread recognition that knowledge is not passively poured into students' heads, but instead constructed by each learner. As learners actively engage in experiencing the world, they are just as actively constructing models in their brain to account for what they are undergoing.... Drama works powerfully because the bodies of the participants are stimulated as well as the minds. (pp. 16 – 17)

At Bexhill, opportunities for dramatic thinking or "thinking with their whole beings" (p. 17) did not come only in classroom conversations focused on the subtleties of small slices of text. Indeed, as they took up drama in their classrooms as well as in their after-school clubs, the children also came to understand that in gesture, movement, and expression, they must give attention to highly nuanced techniques, often more effective than obvious and over-blown ones.





Developing a dramatic range

In their effort to provide a range of dramatic activities, the Bexhill Teacher Research Team (TRT) took up drama in a variety of ways. Moreover, to enhance their own thinking about what was happening through this process, they agreed to note carefully their children's growth over time. The Creative Partnerships School Co-ordinator Joy Lowther contacted numerous local theatre companies and commissioned them to provide professional performances for the children. Some were one-off appearances, for such interactions with artists and their companies have been in the past a customary way that schools interact with the world of art. On such occasions, actors come, set up their scenery, play their parts, and leave in the wake of the children's applause.

On the suggestion of researcher Shelby Wolf and through the conviction of the TRT, Bexhill invited some groups of actors in for short-term residencies so that they could work with the children over a period of time to create and perform plays. Watching and learning as the actors did their work, Rachael Dawson was inspired to begin a Year Five Drama Club. She and her colleague Anna Young often ran the once-a-week, after-school club themselves, but they also invited in guest artists to help them move their children to new levels.

Rachael was particularly impressed with Theatre Cap-a-Pie, a company whose name stands for theatre from "head to toe." In the spring of 2003, their first year at Bexhill, this group worked for a full week to create an original play with twenty children from Rachael's Drama Club. This pattern continued into the next academic year. During this second year (2004), Cap-a-Pie worked with Rachael's after-school Drama Club intensively for a week on a Bexhill version of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Following this initial week, Cap-a-Pie's leaders, Gordon Poad and Mark Labrow, returned from time to time to help with rehearsals and to give the Year Five performance a boost.

Lesley Watson and Linda Nesbitt also began an after-school Drama Club for the Year Two classes in the spring of 2003. During 2004, in the second year of the club, they worked extensively with a Performing Arts Specialist, Bethany Corlett, to gather ideas for their own teaching and to extend their children's dramatic repertoire. The fourth teacher on the TRT, Clare Moonie, worked with after-school music and was also responsible for physical education. She incorporated drama into her classroom life, particularly through specific techniques, such as "hot-seating." During hot-seating, an individual (who takes a chair in front of the class) is asked to take on the role of a particular character and answer questions from the class as if he or she were that character, and not a student from the class. All members of the TRT chose to think about drama in terms of how the school's extensive participation in drama might extend and expand their children's language fluency and productive capabilities with the language of academic reasoning.

At Bexhill, developing a dramatic range did not just mean the range of activities in which children participated – including theatre games, hot seating, and playing parts in plays. More important, it meant exploring the subtle but critical kinds of learning that open as children take on a wide range of roles and think and talk outside their usual status as "student" or "child." At Bexhill, children became everything from a drowning girl, to a clown at the circus who can't remember the ingredients for cream pie, to an old lady trying to cross the street in heavy traffic, to Puck in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Taking on a new role means a willingness to believe in the possibility of being another. Constantin Stanislavski, actor and artistic director of the Moscow Art Theatre, wrote extensively on "imagined truth":

Creativeness begins from that moment when in the soul and imagination of the actor there appears the magical, creative *if*.

The actor says to himself: "All these properties, make-ups, costumes, the scenery, the publicness of the performance, are lies. I know they are lies, I know I do not need any of them. But *if* they were true, then I would do this and this, and I would behave in this manner and this way towards this and this event."

I came to understand that creativeness begins from that moment when in the soul and imagination of the actor there appears the magical, creative *if*... that is, the imagined truth which the actor can believe as sincerely and with greater enthusiasm than he believes practical truth, just as the child believes in the existence of its doll and of all life in it and around it. From the moment of the appearance of *if* the actor passes from the plane of actual reality into the plane of another life, created and imagined by himself. Believing in this life, the actor can begin to create. (Stanislavski, cited in Cole & Chinoy, 1970, pp. 494 – 495)

This truth, as Stanislavski suggests, is revealed in the expressive choices the actor makes to bring the text off the page and onto the life of the stage. Such lift-offs are especially critical for children whose direct experiences may for the time being be significantly more limited than the range of world experiences assumed in textbooks and tests.

When the children of Bexhill first began to take on roles far outside their immediate world, they found it very difficult. In Clare Moonie's class, for example, her Year Four children read a story called, "Cheat" with a character who submitted to a contest a painting that he had not painted. His dilemma was that he won the contest. Clare explained

that in focusing on “issues and dilemmas” and giving the children the critical experience of explaining what it was like to be inside someone else’s head, her central questions to the children were, “What would you do? Put yourself into that character’s position. Should he own up? Would you?” The children found this task quite challenging and initially came up with simplistic and even violent suggestions. She explained that while “some of them did think about possibilities and what they could do to solve the problem, they do find it quite difficult still.”

In the beginning work of their Year Two Drama Club, Linda Nesbitt and Lesley Watson found the subtleties of character initially escaped their children as well. Once they introduced a theatre game called “The Bear and the Woodcutter.” In this game the trick is to make the individual playing the role of the bear laugh or break character. At first, the children tended to be very loud, forceful, and direct; gradually, however, they developed “sneaky strategies” for making the bear break character. The same pattern emerged when they played “the spy game.” In this drama game, the children were supposed to be spies and follow designated students around without letting them know they were following. In the first few rounds of the game, their loud footsteps and giggles gave away their “spy” status. As the weeks in Drama Club went by and they played this and other theatre games, the children became subtler in their movements, and they sometimes went undetected as a good spy should.

The young children in Linda and Lesley’s Year Two Drama Club had an easier time playing out action-packed roles than those portraying characters who were thinking, collecting information, or reflecting emotions. Once Lesley was leading them through a poem entitled “The Princess Who Wouldn’t Smile” (Riche, 1999). The princess was so solemn that her desperate father promised her in marriage to the suitor who could make her smile. This poem, like the “Bear and the Woodcutter” game the children had played earlier, required the princess to remain in character while suitors, through their outlandish actions and wily manoeuvres, tried to make her change her facial expression.

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Finally, a mysterious man appeared and quietly told the king he could make her smile with just his hand, and ultimately he would hold up a mirror to make the princess beam. As he stood talking with the king, the line read “With bow and arrow, he stood so simple” (p. 104) and Lesley asked, “Who can show me that?”

The children quickly paired up, with one playing the prince and one the king, and they worked to create tableaux – or frozen moments – to display the scene. Interestingly, rather than stand “so simple,” the children playing the part of the mysterious stranger picked up on the “bow and arrow” part of the line and imitated drawing a bow with arms stretched to let loose a volley of arrows. This action proved too enticing to resist, and soon children playing the part of the king were arching their imaginary bows as well. Only with considerable practice, as well as dramatic illustration over time, did the children move away from the tendency to jump immediately to action at the expense of character depth and suspenseful building of plot line.

The children gained many transferable language and thinking skills as they participated directly in more and more drama – thinking ahead, planning for possibilities, and playing out the thoughts *and* the actions of others through roles. But their teachers had yet another essential of theatre in mind as they moved forward through their ongoing weeks and months of drama experience at Bexhill. The children learned what *critique* meant and how, as they became creative thinkers, they must learn to be critical thinkers as well.



Taking on the role of critic

Work in drama requires constant attention to detail. Children learning to play roles, plan costumes and sets, find props, and watch as attentive audience members must also gain experience in giving and taking *critique*. Unlike criticism, often thought of as harmful or hurtful, critique springs from comparison with other occasions of drama or adventures in imagination. When professional artists came to Bexhill, the best of them always modelled critique. For example, when Theatre Cap-a-Pie led the Year Five children in their creation of a “Play in a Week,” actor Mark Labrow rarely shied away from offering critique on the children’s progress (for more detail on Mark’s ways of engaging the children in critique, see the booklet in this series entitled *A way of working: teachers in drama education*). Critique is marked by questions, descriptive commentary, and attentive notice to unique or special contributions. For example, in his continual effort to raise the volume of his players’ voices he said, “The lines you’ve got now are brilliant, but you don’t want to lose them.”

Within this critique, Mark offers a “positive on a negative”; he also invites the children to think of cause and effect in hypothetical terms. He is saying: “If you want your brilliant lines to be heard, then you must work to ensure that the audience can hear you” or “if you do not raise the volume of your voice, your lines will go unheard.” Critique always carries the value of projecting the listener forward into thinking about the future; thus, mistakes in the past become building blocks for positives ahead.

Mark also made clear the essentials of the *craft of constant revision* in the creation of a play. As their rehearsals progressed, Mark continually evaluated the children’s performances and helped them think of alternatives for refinement and improvement. In one scene, the protagonist and her friends stopped their conversation to help a drowning girl. In the early rehearsals, they had their discussion and

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then heard the girl's cry for help. But Mark asked the children to break up segments of the scene, so that the girl's shouts for "HELP!" would come in between the spaces of the talk of the three friends. This revision improved the pacing and emotional impact of the scene.

Occasions like those with Theatre Cap-a-Pie allow children to hear professionals who are not trained as teachers to talk about their own work and also give directions and critique to the work of the children. This exposure to professional artists means that children hear language that is neither simplified nor specifically shaped for them or the curriculum. Professionals who are most successful in their work with children talk to them just as they would to other actors. This kind of talk triggers the children to begin to think of themselves as something else beyond or outside their ordinary existence as children or pupils. Such experience in playing other roles opens up possibilities they may see themselves in for further and future roles as they grow older.

Actors talking with children also bring them the specialised vocabulary of the professions surrounding the world of the theatre. Children thereby gain receptive knowledge of theatre terms, such as *improvise*, *freeze*, *actor*, *stage*, and *scene*. Then they learn to produce these terms, and as they make their own forays into critique, children often accent their commentary with theatre vocabulary. As Rachael's Year Five Drama Club members prepared for a play on their own, their debriefing sessions were marked by comments like "We've got to be quieter on the stairs. If we don't, the audience won't be able to hear the actors on stage" and "We have to speak in a Level 4 voice!"

Children also learn that they must watch others who work alongside them in the creation of a play. Watching and adapting to connect actions, make a script flow more easily, and create a more believable

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scene take place naturally and frequently within theatre. Directors give directions to players so that they move reciprocally and with mutual goals to carry the play forward. In other words, young players have to listen and sort out which parts of directions apply to their character and which ones apply to other characters on the set or stage. This kind of listening embraces more than the self, but remains critical to individuals, for often the specific movements of one person make or break a scene in terms of what one actor's movement means for another actor's response.

When the Bexhill Teacher Research Team (TRT) first saw critique in action with Theatre Cap-a-Pie, they were impressed. Lesley said she loved Mark's "energy" and how he "kept it moving" by "punching in" with "very focused" commentary. Linda praised Mark's ability to play the "devil's advocate" or "foil" to reflect on and reflect back the children's thinking. She was struck by his willingness to agree or disagree with them to lead them to an improvement in the play. Clare focused on Mark's repeated use of "because" as he searched for the motivation behind the characters' actions. She also appreciated Mark's ability to be "very firm" with the children, while simultaneously conveying an air of acceptance and confidence in what the children could do. Linda, in fact, felt that Mark could "ask them to do anything, and they would do it." And she seemed to say this with a sense of real admiration for Mark's Pied Piper draw on the children.

In drama activities in their classrooms and clubs, the teachers slowly began to incorporate critique. As we explain in our booklet on the Student Research Team (SRT) *What could happen if? drama for learning from others*, the teachers learned about critique not only from adult professionals but also from the children themselves. They saw firsthand that rather than being stung by commentary, children responded well to questions and advice about how to improve their

performance. When working on “The Princess Who Wouldn’t Smile,” Linda and her Year Two group watched a pair of children – Dylan and Caitlin – perform the last verse of the poem, when the princess and the mysterious stranger finally marry:

Linda: Chloe, what did you think of that?

Chloe: I liked the end.

Lauren: I’m sorry, but because they got married, they could have linked their arms at the end.

Linda: That might be a good idea. Do you think you could– What do you think? Lauren said at the end because you got married, you could have linked each other.

Chloe: Me mum linked arms with me dad when she got married, ‘cause she was a bride.

Linda: Well, see that’s what happens. (To Dylan, the boy playing the groom) What do you think about that?

Dylan: I don’t know.

Linda: You don’t know. Do you feel all right about having Caitlin to link your arm?

Dylan: No.

Linda: Well, when you’re an actor you’ve got to do things sometimes that are a part of the role.

The children made a few more suggestions, and then Linda gave Dylan a compliment: “You know what I liked? I liked when Dylan actually pretended to put the mirror in front of Caitlin’s face.” This led to a brief discussion of whether it would be good for Dylan to carry a small mirror, and one child offered the information that she had a small one at home.

Even though seven-year-old Dylan was understandably hesitant to link arms with a girl, he listened to the critique, paused, and then decided he just couldn’t go along with it. But he liked the idea of holding a mirror up to the princess’s face and agreed to carry out the suggestion. Thus, a simple scene becomes a space for discussion as children provide several solutions before agreeing on a final interpretation. Dylan’s ultimate decision rested on what he felt he could or couldn’t do, and through collaborative commentary his interpretation became richer in nature.

Although it might have been richer still had he taken up the suggestion to link arms, Linda allowed him to make the choice. She explained, “Well, when you’re an actor you’ve got to do things sometimes that are a part of the role,” but she ultimately accepted his decision. Thus, critique consists of ideas, questions, and commentary that *suggest* rather than *command*.

In describing Dorothy Heathcote’s “mantle of the expert” approach to drama – Cecily O’Neil (cited in Heathcote & Bolton, 1995) explained,

In mantle of the expert, responsibility for the learning is shared among the group and with the teacher. The teacher is also admitted as a member of the learning community, one whose commitment and courage, skills and understanding, are necessary to drive the experience forward. The key function of the teacher is to maintain the learning experience and support and challenge the students within it... In mantle of the expert, the students’ prior knowledge and experience is validated and their frame of reference is enlarged. (pp. viii-ix)

Most often, calls for reflection at Bexhill occurred with the phrase “Have a think about it”.

While Linda had not yet studied the “mantle of the expert” approach, along with other members of the TRT, she was quickly learning about the powerful need for reflection in drama.

Most often, calls for reflection at Bexhill occurred with the phrase “Have a think about it.” In the second year of their work with drama, the TRT’s children had all participated in plays for the annual Christmas performance. Throughout their rehearsals, there was ample space for critique. Indeed, the greatest amount of work in drama comes in the planning and thinking about what can happen. Imagining future scenes asks one to pull up experience from the past, see what is present and available, and propose what could be. Most of the work of planning takes place within the silence of thinking through one’s thoughts. Then language that has been thought through has to be voiced to others, explanations given, and ideas of specific actions proposed. Still, even after the planning and the holiday performance were over, the teachers gave their children even more opportunities to think about their work. Four quick glimpses into the TRT’s classrooms demonstrate Bexhill’s strong emphasis on reflection.

A few days after the Christmas performance of their play, *Sugar Plum* (Corbett, 2003), a group of Year Two children sat quietly on the rug in front of their teacher, Linda Nesbitt. Linda had asked them to perform once more for a visitor from the States – Shelby Wolf – and now they needed to decide whether to perform solely for Shelby or to invite another class as well. Even though another class of children wanted to come, Linda had told their teacher quite directly that it was her pupils’ decision. She turned to her children and asked: “I need your advice. Do you want to do the performance for another class or do it just for Shelby?” The children started to answer, but Linda stopped them, encouraging them to talk in partners about the pros and cons. She specifically wanted them to “*have a think about it.*”

In a Reception class, the children similarly sat with their teacher, Lesley Watson, studying a Nativity scene by Rembrandt. In the Christmas production, Lesley’s children had performed the Nativity, and they were learning to look at illustrations more closely to pick up hints about the scene. Lesley distributed Christmas cards to her children – each card was unique, but all centred on the Nativity. She asked them to study their cards carefully, explaining: “*Think* of a question that you would like to ask about your picture. There might be something in your picture that makes you wonder. I wonder who he is? I wonder what you call that? I wonder where they come from? Remember, your question is not something you can *tell* me, but *ask* me something you are puzzled about.”

Clare Moonie’s Year Five class was debriefing the Christmas play, going over all aspects of their performance. They had performed “Captain Christmas” and recently watched the video of their dress rehearsal. They had discussed their ability to face the audience, speak in clear voices, and deliver their dance steps, when Clare asked: “What about our gestures then? What else could we have done to use our bodies?” The children came up with several suggestions and seemed to agree that using gestures made it “more interesting for the audience.” After an extended conversation, Clare introduced them to a written evaluation form, asking them to rate and reflect on their performance in writing. She explained that they “needed to do these evaluations to *think* about our play.”

Meanwhile, the children in Rachael Dawson’s Year Five class assembled at their desks in front of the video screen, viewing their performance of “Captain Christmas.” As they watched, the children mouthed lines from the play, mimicked dance steps and gestures, and broke into song. After the viewing, Rachael asked them to consider the performance highlights: “So what I’d like to know is your favourite bit of the performance. You need to gather your thoughts, for it is quite difficult to choose.” She gave them time to “have a think,” but the children thought only very briefly before they began to raise their

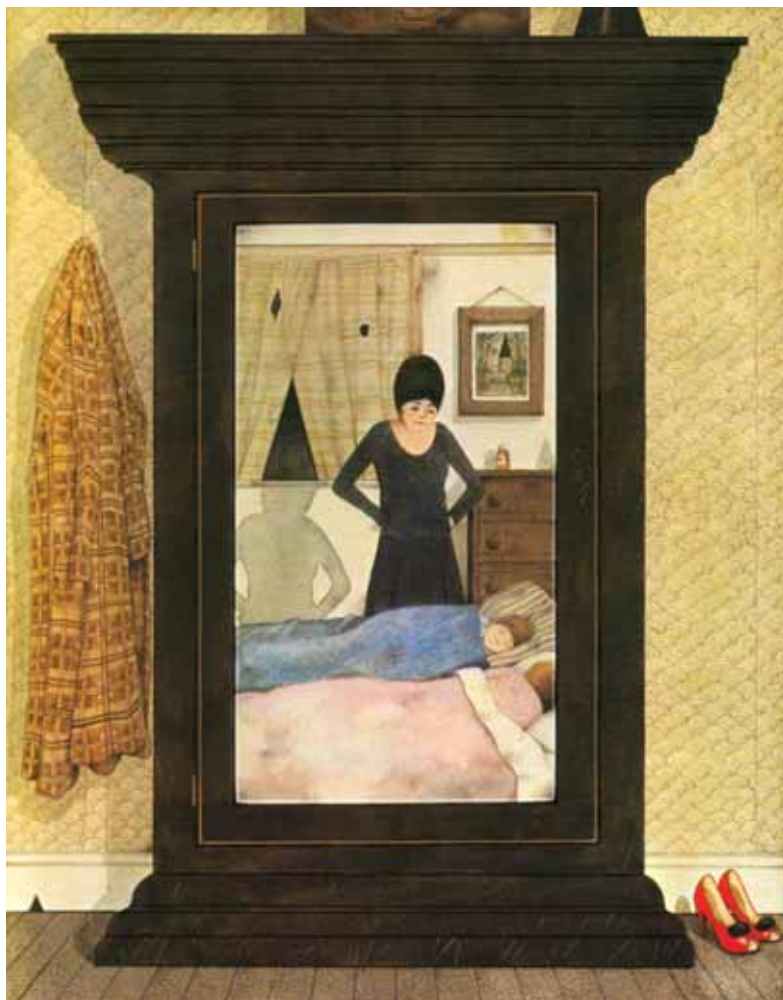
“Reflection will only occur in a classroom where teachers are able to create an open climate in which children’s own reflections and contributions are valued.”

hands to reply. Still, Rachael wanted to demonstrate how necessary time was to thoughtfulness: “Well, I haven’t had enough time, so let me have a think.” Later she explained, “I felt that if I needed time to think about it, they would need it as well.”

These four vignettes align with the emphasis that drama educators place on reflection. As Wagner (1998) suggests, “Reflection will only occur in a classroom where teachers are able to create an open climate in which children’s own reflections and contributions are valued. It will not happen when a teacher operates in a prescriptive way, asking only questions to which he or she knows the answers” (p. 80).

Thinking is serious business and takes time and attention. Even more important, this time must allow for playing with ideas since answers are put forward to be explored. Playing with answers for the paths they may open or the stories they suggest enables children to take up the idea that they can be in charge of how and where their minds and imaginations roam.





Taking Character to Court

On one of her research visits to Bexhill, Shelby brought a copy of *Hansel and Gretel* (Brothers Grimm, 1981), wonderfully illustrated by Anthony Browne. She talked with the TRT about the potential for drama in picturebooks, especially those with texts rich in interpretive possibilities. In the beginning of this particular text, the stepmother tries to talk the father into abandoning the children in the forest. When the evil stepmother looks in on the sleeping children, they are gently, even angelically asleep, wrapped tight in their stained and tattered blankets, blue for Hansel and pink for Gretel. The fact that they are pictured sleeping *toward* one another may be a hint of the fact that when left on their own, they have at least each other to count on.

As the stepmother wakes the children early in the morning, she scolds, "Get up, you lazybones, we must go to the forest to fetch wood." Giving them each only a small slice of bread, she warns them not to eat it too soon, for there's nothing else to eat. The illustration portrays the stepmother as she leans over the children, hands on the hips of her coal black dress. The stepmother's shadow meets with the cut of the curtain to form a witch's hat; close scrutiny reveals that this hat's shape is repeated and reflected several times in the room, on top of the wardrobe and even in the mouse's hole. The attentive looker must wonder just why this black triangle is so often repeated in this scene of the threatening stepmother sending the children on their way. Could this be a visual warning of what the children will soon face? No hint of such foreboding is given in the words of the text.

The stepmother tells them there's nothing to eat. But she herself owns a pair of beautiful red high heels – red, a colour that often signals *danger ahead*. And Anthony Browne, an English author / illustrator who is known for his cross-textual allusions may also be guiding us toward another fairy tale. In *Sleeping Beauty* the evil stepmother ultimately meets her end when she's made to dance in red

Picturebooks offer great potential for drama, especially those with texts rich in interpretive possibilities.

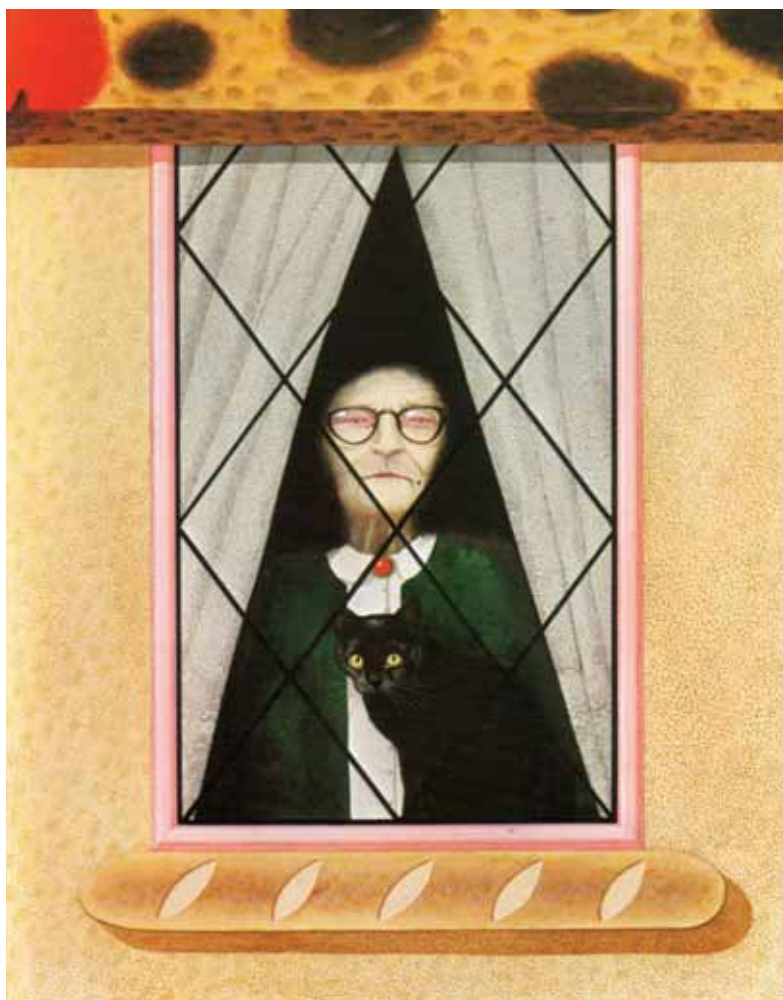
hot shoes until she falls down dead. Do the stylish red shoes in this picture symbolise that Hansel and Gretel's evil stepmother's extravagance is only temporary and will lead to her ultimate demise?

Later, the shrew of a stepmother leads the family off into the forest in spiked boots and leopard skin coat with a cigarette jammed between her lips. But two pictures reveal the stepmother for who she really is. In the first picture we see her greeting the children after they have spent one night in the forest and then found their way home by following Hansel's trail of stones. The second picture occurs later in the story, when the children have been abandoned once again and have found their way to the witch's house. She, too, greets them at her door. The striking resemblance between the two women is Browne's way of telling us what psychologists like Bruno Bettelheim (1977) have suggested for years: The stepmother and the witch are one and the same.

When the TRT studied the picturebook, all were drawn into the illustrations. Rachael Dawson was particularly intrigued, and she decided to use the book for a drama exercise in her Year Five class. She read her children the story, posting large reprints of the art on the blackboard behind her. She found her children, unaccustomed to experiencing long sessions with children's literature in their classrooms, utterly *fascinated* by the text. They quickly came to the conclusion that there was a critical relationship between the two women in the story. The children jumped with ease into discussing the horrors of a mother who could abandon her children with so little hesitation. But Rachael decided to take the conversation even further. She asked them to put the stepmother on trial.

Together she and the children made a list of the stepmother's many faults, including the fact that she had abandoned her children in the forest. The children then went to their seats and, taking on the role of





Rachael reminded her Year Five children that they must try to think like the stepmother.

the stepmother, wrote excuses for why she had behaved as she did. Rachael reminded them that they must try to think like the stepmother. If she were on trial for her life, she'd want to have persuasive justifications for her behaviour. Rachael began by modelling the stepmother's role and speaking words she might have spoken had she been on trial. She assigned two other children to play the lawyer and judge, while the rest of the audience served as jury.

Stepmum: I just tried to teach them skills in real life. Real life is not all sweetness and light. And everything doesn't come easy. I took my children into the woods to teach them valuable life skills. I wouldn't really want them dead.

Lawyer: Did you or did you not force your husband to do some things he didn't want to do?

Stepmum: I did NOT force him to make that decision to take the children into the woods. I suggested it as – Just – Well, as I said before, to show the children how tough life can be. How could I force a grown man to take his children into the woods and leave them? The decision was left up to him. He didn't have to agree.

Lawyer: Did you call your children names?

Stepmum: Well, I did, but I was only joking. It was said in fun. I mean, you can hear the tone in my voice. I didn't shout (voice changes to an ugly, loud tone), "LAZYBONES!" I said, (switches to a sweeter voice) "Come on, you lazybones, you have to get out of bed now." And I didn't

say, (mean tone) “You IDIOTS!” I just was joking and trying to toughen the children up.

Lawyer: Did you or did you not blame your children for when they came back?

Stepmum: I was fairly annoyed when the children came back. Yes, I have to admit that. But you see, I’d been up all night worried about them! They’d been gone for so long. I had the police to call. I had to inform their grandparents. I didn’t know where they were. It was worry that made me sound annoyed when they came back. (Rachael indicated to the judge that it was time for the verdict.)

Judge: (To the rest of the classroom.) Put your hands up if you think this awful stepmother is guilty. Raise your hand! Raise your hand if you think she’s not guilty. (The children overwhelmingly voted Rachael guilty!)

Several children eagerly volunteered for the next scene and the next and the next. Each time, three different children played judge, lawyer, and stepmother or the witch. Several “lawyers” and “stepmothers” read from their written exercises on the crimes accused and the excuses they had created while they played. For example, one lawyer asked, “Did you really abuse your children?” and the stepmother replied, “No, I wouldn’t do such a thing.” Another lawyer asked, “Did you or did you not abuse the children?” and the stepmother said, “I taught them a valuable lesson.” Other stepmothers claimed, “I would never in the world call my children names.” And when questioned about goading the father, one exclaimed, “I didn’t force him!”

The witches / stepmothers on the stand then began to ask questions back to the lawyer and members of the jury. For example, one said, “Why would I want my children dead, when I love them?”—

Although the questions came quickly on top of one another, Rachael’s children were starting to support one another’s comments with asides like, “Good point!”

and the comment was met with silence. Another witch said, “If someone came and et [ate] your house, you’d sure reprove them wouldn’t you?” though a member of the jury said, “No.” When asked about his house, this same witch claimed, “I can’t afford bricks” but several children on the jury shouted, “But you can afford sweets!” Although the questions came quickly on top of one another, Rachael’s children were starting to support one another’s comments with asides like, “Good point!”

In the scenes to follow, the lawyer often started the questioning, but the children in the audience / jury soon took it over asking questions of the witch / stepmother, “You said you were poor. You’re a witch. Why could you not magic something up?” And this question was quickly followed by, “If you’re so poor, how could you afford cigarettes?” The children “Ooohed!” and “Ahhed!” over this comment and nodded in agreement. One of the longest exchanges took place when a slim child with long black hair quietly took the stand:

Judge: Silence in the court.

Lawyer: Is it true that you abused your children and left them to die in the woods?

Stepmum: I didn’t abuse them. They got lost.

Lawyer: Did you say that you hoped they would die?

Stepmum: I didn’t say anything like that.

Lawyer: Did you really call your children “lazybones” and names?

Stepmum: Believe me, I never done that.

Lawyer: Were you pleased to see your children again?

Stepmum: I was surprised to see my children, and I was happy.

Lawyer: (In disgust) I rest my case. (The questioning from the audience / jury then began)

Juror #1: How could you forget your children?

Stepmum: 'Cause I had so much on me mind.

Juror #1: How could you – Why could you endure to forget your children? They are more important than just other things.

Stepmum: I was just busy with me housework.

Juror #2: When you say you had a lot on your mind, what was it? Was it your planning to set the children alone in the woods?

Stepmum: No, I was just busy.

Juror #2: How do we know?

Juror #3: When you gave them two slices of bread and set them free, why could you not spend it on something different? Why'd you spend the money on cigarettes and only give them two slices of bread?

Stepmum: I need me cigarettes.

Juror #3: Why? It's bad for your health.

Stepmum: (Slumping her shoulders in resignation) I can't stop smoking.

Shelby: What about all those creams that were on your dresser? Those looked expensive to me. How could you afford all those creams and lipsticks and things like that?

Stepmum: I found them in a basket when I was in the forest.

Shelby: You found them?

Stepmum: (Nods)

Shelby: In a basket?

Stepmum: (Nods)

Shelby: IN THE FOREST?!

Chorus: (Giggles)

Juror #3: Man, oh man, she's lying!

Judge: No more questions. Raise your hand if you think she's guilty.

Juror #2: (Raising his hand and saying to Shelby sarcastically) Finding that stuff in a basket? Unhunh!

Needless to say, the stepmother in this case was found guilty.

The stepmother trials were emblematic of the children's growth in analysing character. Based on their interpretations of the Grimm Brothers' words and Anthony Browne's art, they came to strong conclusions about the stepmother and the witch being one and the same. But when they dramatised the tale they took their understandings to an even higher level. Because they had the benefit of Rachael's fine modelling, they learned that once on the stand, they had to let their own feelings about the stepmother go, and try to think as she did in an effort to save her life. Thus, they used "I," "my," and "mine," holding to the pronouns of character, and they argued back with the judge, lawyer, and jury. Sometimes their ploys worked, for the stepmum who pleaded, "Why would I want my children dead, when I love them?" was actually found innocent by the jury.

Still, even when the excuses seemed plausible, the jurors went after the selfish behaviour of a stepmother who was simply too busy with her housework to pay close attention, especially when she chose cigarettes over her children's nourishment. While the children certainly knew about addictions, the stepmother's words "I need me cigarettes" simply left them cold. And when Shelby stepped into the position of legal assistant in the questioning and asked about the creams and cosmetics, the stepmother faltered with a less than plausible response. Though she stood her ground under Shelby's sarcastic questioning, the children knew she was false. "Man, oh man, she's lying!" one juror exclaimed, and the children unanimously agreed on this stepmum's guilt.



Summary

Perhaps no condition in classrooms reflects a more positive statement on the capacity for mental agility of children than lots and lots of talk around problem-finding and problem-solving. Drama's greatest gift to learners – both teachers and students – is its capacity for generating talk about what goes on inside the heads of thinkers.

Modelling language is something teachers do very well. Bringing highly interactive language between teachers and students into classrooms requires a medium that enlists new roles. Stepping into drama demonstrates the potential of taking on other roles and gives teacher and students a vehicle through which to practice speaking in the voice of another. When called upon to speak and act as another, we are also required to learn and think as the other. To play a lawyer, a beleaguered mum, a pirate, or a juror requires drawing from experience not generally gained in the curriculum. To enter the head of a bear and a bird confronting implausible conditions in the natural world demands drawing from experiences that cannot be collected either from direct and real-world events or from reference sources. None of us will ever really be a bear or a bird, and we are unlikely to see rainbows as anything other than natural phenomena that occur under certain climatic conditions.

Only by playing in and out and with dramatic roles can learners gain sufficient practice to achieve fluency in either the thinking or the speaking/writing skills called for in Key Stage test questions. Bexhill's teachers, led by their worries over their children's performance on such tests, took up the challenges of drama. In creating their Drama Clubs and in listening so attentively to visiting professional drama groups, the TRT partnered in highly creative ways – with their children, one another, children's literary characters, and real-life professionals. These teachers volunteered their time and energies, but most important they gave their imagination, commitment to learn, and willingness to connect drama to classroom life.

Drama's greatest gift to learners – both teachers and students – is its capacity for generating talk about what goes on inside the heads of thinkers.

In an ideal world, all teachers would have rich participation experiences within the creation of dramatic texts and productions and enjoy the time and leisure to think and talk about their own learning (see Greene, 1995 and Hartland, Kinder, & Hartley, 1995 for further support of this point, particularly with regard to the quality of student learning within and through the arts). Similarly, in such an ideal world, all teachers would have hours each week to explore children's literature and consider which texts might be most appropriate for use with dramatic techniques. Alas, such an ideal world does not exist even in the most richly endowed schools.

The Bexhill TRT story is one that goes on for the children of Bexhill through the creative partnering made possible through sustained collaboration with professional actors. The TRT chose their own small and locally adapted version of an "ideal world," and they did so within the realities of their daily routines as well as voluntarily in their after-school work with children. In doing so, they shaped the work with artists to meet needs they identified for themselves and their children. Rather than send their children into the woods of drama alone, the Bexhill teachers went along with them, exchanging ideas in their joint journey, pointing out features in the path, and listening closely to their children's own ideas for alternate routes. Most important, they charted for themselves and the children of Bexhill Primary School long-standing habits of "having a think about it."

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Permissions

- P1 Quote: Little Bird finally speaks: “So it was a rainbow, and I found the pot of gold.” But Bear disagrees, “Oh no, it wasn’t. It was a sky fire...and I put it out” *Key Stage One – Pot of Gold*. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 1999).
- P1 Quote: One question asks “Why do you think that Bear filled the pot with water?” Another queries: “Why do you think the friends were quiet for a long time?” *Key Stage One – Pot of Gold*. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 1999).
- P2 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). (2003b). *Fact Sheet*. www.qca.org.uk
- P19 Quote: “With bow and arrow, he stood so simple” *The Princess Who Wouldn’t Smile*. (Scholastic Workshop, Drama 5-7. Alison Chaplin, Scholastic Publication, 1999. Poem by Clive Riche, previously unpublished). www.artsonthemove.co.uk
- P34, P37 & P38
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- P35 Quote: “Get up, you lazybones, we must go to the forest to fetch wood.” © 1981, 2003 Anthony Browne. Extract from *Hansel & Gretel* illustrated by Anthony Browne. Reproduced by permission of Walker Books Ltd, London SE11 5HJ.

Credits

John McGagh began working for Creative Partnerships Durham Sunderland at its inception in 2002 after several years working in literature development in the North East of England. Turning to his work on *Dramatic learning in the primary school*, John shepherded this series from beginning to end. Through multiple meetings with multiple parties – researchers, Creative Partnerships directors, and the Headteacher of Bexhill, Joy Lowther – John repeatedly demonstrated the essence of ‘creative partnerships’. His insights, expertise, and diplomacy helped guide the series through the myriad decisions involved in the creation and completion of any academic text. With an ear for editing, an eye for design, and the persistence needed to acquire necessary permissions, John’s contributions helped bring this series to life.

The authors would also like to thank the following people for their support in the development and delivery of this research programme.

Katherine Pearson - former Director of Creative Partnerships Durham Sunderland.

Dave Smith - former Head Teacher of Bexhill Primary School.

Lorna Fulton - Director of Creative Partnerships Durham Sunderland.

Anita Murtha - parent helper at Bexhill Primary School.

Creative Partnerships provides school children across England with the opportunity to develop creativity in learning and to take part in cultural activities of the highest quality.

Based at Arts Council England, Creative Partnerships has a unique approach to working with schools. It first helps schools to identify their individual needs and then enables them to develop long-term, sustainable partnerships with organisations and individuals including architects, theatre companies, museums, cinemas, historic buildings, dance studios, recording studios, orchestras, film-makers, website designers and many others.

Creative Partnerships aims to provide a powerful, focused, high profile and inspirational tool for change, genuinely capturing the imagination of children, parents and carers, teachers and communities. There are currently 36 Creative Partnerships areas in England.

Learning for Creative Futures is a series of publications, for general, arts practice, and academic readerships, that portrays how learning environments engage children and adolescents in sustained creative work and play. Assuming roles and relationships that bring close association with professionals who work in creative industries, young learners experience the vital mix of imagination, long-term planning, knowledge accumulation, skill development, and informed critique. The international research team of *Learning for Creative Futures* includes scholars from the disciplines of anthropology, education, linguistics, psychology, political science, and sociology. This International Enquiry Network is led by Shirley Brice Heath and Shelby Wolf.

All stories have behind them many other stories. The tales told in this series are no exception. Behind *Dramatic learning in the primary school* are the people and the contexts that give the qualities of character, time, setting, and energy to their narratives of creative learning.

This series documents a year of creative partnering through drama for language learning. Three groups made this work possible.

CREATIVE PARTNERSHIPS DURHAM SUNDERLAND

Creative Partnerships Durham Sunderland brokered the original relationship between the International Enquiry Network and Joy Lowther, Creative Partnerships Co-ordinator at Bexhill Primary School. This relationship then established itself and Bexhill became a vibrant and committed hub for the research work documented here. Other partners came to Bexhill and added expertise to this work – notably Mark Labrow of County Durham's *Theatre Cap-a-Pie*.

Creative Partnerships Durham Sunderland curates and commissions a creative learning programme that enables teachers, young people and creative practitioners to work in collaboration to explore ideas, generate new creative work and develop new approaches to learning, teaching and cultural production.

This is achieved by building long-term collaborative partnerships among schools (22 partnership schools: infant, primary, secondary and special schools) and selected creative/cultural partners.

The Durham Sunderland programme is driven by research and explores the impact of participation in, and the experience of, creative learning and engagement in cultural activities in relation to personal change (critical thinking, cognitive decision-making, learning capacity and motivation), structural change (schools and cultural organisations), community change (creative learning applied beyond the school gates) and the development of language and writing skills – as well as creative and cultural production in the cultural sector.

BEXHILL PRIMARY SCHOOL

In the year between the springs of 2003 and 2004, Creative Partnerships Durham Sunderland supported pupils and teachers at Bexhill Primary School to work intensively with the dramatic arts. Professional actors helped pupils create plays during several short-term residencies. Teachers began weekly after-school Drama Clubs – one for younger children and another for pupils in year 5. Teachers brought numerous techniques of dramatic production and critique into their own thinking about the entire curriculum.

Examination of Key Stage tests across the subject areas revealed that these tests expected pupils to be comfortable using language in ways not generally found in daily classroom life. In addition to the joy and pleasure of work in the dramatic arts, teachers at Bexhill saw participation in the thinking, creating, and critiquing that come with drama as a way to improve language fluency of primary-level pupils.

Bexhill Primary School is situated in a housing estate on the outskirts of Sunderland. Built in the early sixties, the housing has been attractively upgraded. Bexhill stands in its own green environment, characterised by tree plantings and ‘hides’ – in which both children and adults can relax. The school plays an important role in a community with high levels of unemployment, a wide range of family contexts and little cultural diversity. There is a positive community spirit, strengthened by links with the on-site library, community association and the local church. The school has a roll of around 350 3-11 year-olds and seeks to raise aspirations through close involvement with families. Speaking, listening and social skills are major foci for the early years. The development of oral confidence and facility remains a focus through key stages 1 and 2. While the school performs well in national tests, it strives to raise attainment. The school also holds the *Artsmark* Silver. At Bexhill, children are engaged in a range of quality arts experiences, which broaden their cultural experience and encourage them to develop skills and attitudes, which

could enrich their lives and offer them future employment and leisure options. The school is determined to build language and thinking skills through an innovative approach to the curriculum. The school believes that the development of drama-rich curricula can take children’s understanding beyond their own experience and encourage the development of higher order language skills. Bexhill is also a training school for Initial Teacher Training and is committed to sharing expertise with others.

The names of all the children mentioned or cited in these booklets have been changed to protect confidentiality.

INTERNATIONAL ENQUIRY NETWORK

An international research team studying community regeneration linked to the arts and creativity in several post-industrial nations worked with teachers and pupils at Bexhill Primary School to document what happened over the year of intensive work in the dramatic arts. Shelby Wolf, Professor of Education at the University of Colorado at Boulder, led the work with Bexhill’s teachers.

A core of four teachers (1 in Year R, 1 in Year 2, 2 in Year 5) took on roles as members of the Teacher Research Team (TRT).

Lesley Watson, Year R

Linda Nesbitt, Year 2

Clare Moonie, Year 5

Rachael Dawson, Year 5

This team worked intensively over the year to contemplate their classroom uses of language. Members of the TRT at Bexhill focused their attention on how pupils’ participation with visiting theatre groups influenced both teacher and pupil language awareness and use. After-school Drama Clubs became a way for teachers to engage pupils regularly in the work of drama – both interim performances and

preparation for the school's Christmas play. These teachers took on responsibilities for audio-recording within their classrooms and reflecting on ways in which Bexhill's work with drama influenced pupil learning and classroom culture.

In addition, a Student Research Team (SRT) worked with Reif Larson, a young actor and drama educator from Brown University's Arts Literacy Program in the spring of 2003. Throughout the spring of 2004, Gayle Sutherland, a teacher of Energetics and drama enthusiast, worked with an expanded SRT. These pupils, ranging from year 4 – year 6 learned how to audio-record and take notes on the language used by professional actors in their work within the school. The SRT group met throughout the year from time to time with the TRT to discuss what they had learned through their observations and analysis of the language of creating and critiquing drama.

The research: From the spring of 2003 through the school year 2004, two scholars, Shirley Brice Heath and Shelby Wolf, looked closely at how language, attention, inspiration, and collaboration within Bexhill Primary School changed through artistic partnership. Their work brought teachers, artists, and students into the research process as questioners, data interpreters, and readers and respondents assessing the results as set forth in this series of booklets. The research upon which *Dramatic learning in the primary school* is based includes transcripts and fieldnotes recorded and analysed during the year and reported here through thematic patterns. Academic publications of the *Learning for creative futures* series will report detailed comparative analyses of language and cognitive development in the context of specific features of creative learning environments.

Shirley Brice Heath, linguistic anthropologist, has studied how different kinds of learning environments support children's later language development. She takes as her focus within-school creative programmes as well as sustained interactions young people have in their work and play within families, peer relations, and community organisations. She is the author of the classic *Ways with words: language, life, and work in communities and classrooms* (Cambridge University Press, 1983/1996). Heath has taught at universities throughout the world – most notably Stanford University and Brown University, and currently as Visiting Professor at Kings College, University of London. Of emphasis in her research are the long-term effects of learning in environments heavily dependent on the arts. Within this work, she has given special attention to science and environmental projects, and those that encompass social justice concerns. Her resource guide and prize-winning documentary *ArtShow* (2000) feature young leaders in four community arts organisations in the United States. www.shirleybriceheath.com

Shelby Wolf, an award-winning teacher and educational scholar, is a professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research centres on children's language and learning through engagement in literature and collaborative as well as creative modes of expression – discussion, writing, the visual arts, and drama. Her most recent book, *Interpreting literature with children* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), portrays her close work with teachers as co-researchers in the study of children's literary learning. She has worked within numerous school-change programmes to validate the perspectives of teachers who undertake enquiry into how learning works in their classrooms. She is a senior author of *Houghton Mifflin English* (2004), a textbook series devoted to helping children improve as writers. With Shirley Brice Heath, she wrote *The braid of literature: children's worlds of reading* (Harvard University Press, 1992). More recently, she and Shirley co-authored another series of booklets devoted to children's learning through the visual arts: *Visual learning in the community school* (Creative Partnerships, 2004). This series documents research carried out in one community school in Hythe, Kent. <http://www.Colorado.edu/education/faculty/shelbywolf>.

Have a think about it: drama for mental agility

When staff at Bexhill Primary School began working in collaboration with Creative Partnerships in 2002, they decided to add drama in a strong and meaningful way to the learning life of their school. Staff saw their choice as supporting the school's "focus on children's speaking and listening skills." Teachers particularly wanted their children to "think creatively as well as develop confidence in presenting their ideas."

Rather than send their children into the woods of drama alone, the Bexhill teachers went along with them, exchanging ideas in their joint journey, pointing out features in the path, and listening closely to their children's own ideas for alternate routes. Most importantly, they charted for themselves and the children of Bexhill Primary School long-standing habits of "having a think about it."



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