

Katherine Zachest

**drama
games**
FOR YOUNG
CHILDREN

Foreword by Sally Cookson



NICK HERN BOOKS

London

www.nickhernbooks.co.uk

FOREWORD

Children learn through playing games. Whether it's a structured game or one they've made up, it is how they discover how the world works. They play without inhibition – to them it is a serious business. It is to me too.

As a theatre-maker who devises work with companies, 'playing' is the most important element of the process. I always start each morning's rehearsal with a physical warm-up and a game of some description. By immediately getting up on our feet in the rehearsal room, our bodies, minds and imaginations are kick-started into action. We have to be present in the moment and commit to the game with the same passion a child shows when they are released into the playground at break-time. That doesn't mean we all pretend to be children – quite the opposite – but like children we take playing seriously in order to trigger the creativity in the room. On the dreaded first day of rehearsals, when there are lots of people who don't know each other, the tension and anxiety is palpable. A couple of hours of 'mucking about' – as one friend affectionately describes it – sees the atmosphere change, shoulders drop and ideas start to flow.

For ten years I worked exclusively for Travelling Light Theatre Company, making work for very young children and their families. It coincided with the time when my own children were small – and I became passionate about making early years' work. A period of research and development would precede each production and the company were lucky enough to have associations with several infant schools with whom we could collaborate and develop work. St Matthias and Dr Bell's Primary School in Fishponds, Bristol, was one such school –

and it was there that I started to appreciate the significance of play in a child's life.

For young children, play is not something that only occurs at break – it is the means by which they constantly engage, learn and investigate. Some of our most inspiring sessions came out of allowing the children to engage their imaginations without the guidance of the adults in the room. Having spent time playing games, reading stories, and singing songs, we would fill the hall with 'stuff' and observe the children play. It was mind-blowing what they created together – building dens out of rubbish, making costumes out of paper, playing instruments of cardboard, and flying with wings of bubble wrap.

I firmly believe that tapping into children's ability to play is the way to educate and inspire them to learn. Katherine Zachest understands this and her book is a fantastic tool with which to do it. It's also given me new games to take into the rehearsal room and use to release the creativity of the actors with whom I work. I'm looking forward to playing them.

Sally Cookson

Sally Cookson trained at LAMDA. She co-devised and directed Jane Eyre and Peter Pan for the National Theatre, London – both co-produced with Bristol Old Vic, where she is an Associate Artist, and where her other work includes Sleeping Beauty, Treasure Island, The Boy Who Cried Wolf, Pains of Youth and The Visit. She is based in Bristol where she has also worked for Travelling Light Theatre Company for over ten years, and the Tobacco Factory. She has twice been nominated for Olivier Awards – for her productions of Hetty Feather by Jacqueline Wilson, and Cinderella: A Fairy Tale, which both transferred to the West End.

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INTRODUCTION

This book came about as a result of my search for drama curriculum suitable for young children. The more I looked for good-quality and practical material, the more I discovered how little there was available. Throughout my teaching career, I have continually sought out simple, easy-to-follow lesson plans that I could read, understand and implement with little prior preparation.

There are forty lessons in this book to coincide with the approximately forty weeks of the school year. The opening lesson, *Let's Get Started*, is intended to be taught first as it will establish what is possible with your class and is a great introduction to many dramatic elements.

The lesson plans set out in this book are the culmination of many years of working with and developing curriculum in my drama classes. These lessons are designed for early childhood teachers and facilitators in any educational setting and for almost any class size. This book is designed to use, build on and then adapt to suit individual teaching styles and the children you teach. The content has been evaluated and modified and these forty lessons have been a huge success with the children and warmly received by teachers and parents.

I want to help demystify drama in the classroom, making it an achievable and enjoyable experience for both students and teachers. It is important to remember that teaching drama is not just about teaching performance skills (for example: facing out to the audience, loud and clear voices, expression and reaction). Rather, it should be a time to build on children's sense of dramatic play.

This book is written for both beginning teachers looking to incorporate some drama into their

curriculum and for experienced drama educators in need of some extra material for lessons. Although the lessons are numbered, it's not necessary to work through the book sequentially. Rather, I'd recommend that you find a lesson which fits in with your current curriculum, as well as your class's interests and abilities.

I strongly encourage you to take time to reflect and record your experience, add notes, pictures, ideas and responses from the children. Continue to gather resources (for example: songs, poems, stories, websites, blogs) and other drama lesson plans to help you create a rich and invaluable teaching asset. There is a template at the end of the book, also available as a downloadable resource, and guidelines for you to create your own lesson plans (see page 323).

Teaching drama has always been one of my greatest passions, and I hope that this book allows it to become one of yours too.

Why Drama?

Learning drama at an early age will build self-esteem and develop essential life skills. Drama promotes tolerance and mutual respect as children work together to create theatre and explore imaginative experiences. Children learn and develop communication skills, creativity, self-expression and problem-solving skills. Children learn to listen, negotiate, share ideas and work collaboratively. Introducing drama at an early age is a perfect medium for exploring these skills in a safe, non-threatening environment. Drama can be particularly helpful for children who find it difficult to express themselves, or for children with learning difficulties, by providing a platform for them to develop their communication skills.

Dramatic Play

Dramatic play happens when children play pretend, and can be useful in a range of contexts. A drama lesson is a more formal experience which uses dramatic play, but is more purposeful in its intention to consolidate, explore and extend children's learning. The lessons in this book will help you to extend the natural tendency of children's 'pretend play' into a more formal drama experience. It is important that each time you teach a drama lesson you explain to your class that they are going to be 'doing drama'.

This is not to say that these lessons should replace your existing dramatic play areas. Dramatic play is where children discover and learn how to play 'make-believe' with their peers.

It is incredibly beneficial to provide opportunities for dramatic play that is entirely free from adult intervention or correction. It allows children to experiment with role-play (pretending to be someone else), build their vocabulary, and develop important social skills (for example: listening, negotiating, initiating new ideas, problem-solving in a team). The teacher, by observing the play as it unfolds, can better understand the children, their strengths (or difficulties) and their interests.

It is often debated about how, if and when the teacher should intervene with play. If the teacher offers a new prop or idea to enhance the play, the life of the improvised drama can be greatly extended or attract other children to join in. A teacher can also offer a more challenging approach to the play by providing new materials, characters or problems. For example: if the children are playing in a 'restaurant', the teacher may offer some costumes (for example: a chef's hat, or a handbag for the customer, to help define the role), suggest a challenge (for example: the customer is now in a hurry, the waiter is forgetful, the chef burns all the food), or even record the children improvising (using a video camera or iPad) so the children can watch and observe themselves at play. On the other hand, interrupting children during free dramatic play can create problems. You may discover that instead of extending and enriching the play, your

intervention irrevocably changes, or even ends, it. You may unwittingly rob the children of an opportunity to discover something for themselves. It therefore becomes a question of knowing not only whether to intervene, but how and when.

Drama Lessons

While most early childhood centres provide opportunities for pretend play (such as the home corner, a dress-up box or a supermarket), drama lessons are a planned and purposeful time for drama and not a spontaneous moment that happens during your day. It will validate the importance of drama education and send a message to the children, your colleagues and the parent community that drama is respected, valued and important.

It will be beneficial for the children and their development, and also for your own development as an educator if you take some time to reflect on your practice and record how the lessons went. What would you do differently? What worked or didn't work? Remember, children at this age love repetition, so don't be afraid to offer the same lesson within a short period of time. Repeat it with your changes and record what happens. As you develop and practise the material, you become more comfortable and your confidence will increase.

Non-participation

Young children instinctively understand the concepts of pretending and make-believe, and most will eagerly participate in your drama class. But there may be one or two members of your class who prefer to sit out and watch. These children must be gently encouraged, but never forced to participate. It may take a few months for them to feel ready to join in. If possible, use an assistant or another adult in the room to sit with them. Don't allow them to wander off and play elsewhere in the classroom, but ask them to sit and observe their peers at work. You may find that the child is contributing when the group is working as a whole, but becomes hesitant when they are working in

pairs or asked to do something on their own. Be sensitive to their needs and slowly help to build their self-confidence through small steps. Perhaps they might like to hold a costume or a prop rather than trying it on or using it. You might like to give them a musical instrument and ask them to create some sounds for a particular scene. You may want to consider using puppets and teaching puppetry skills. This is a wonderful way of introducing dramatic elements in a non-threatening way. Children who are reluctant to perform in front of peers will feel safer knowing that it is their puppet who is speaking and improvising, not them, as the audience's attention will be on the puppet rather than the child. It is important to remember that children who observe a drama class are still learning valuable skills. Allow them time and it is highly likely that they will eventually join in.

Preparation

The Space

Try to clear away as many distractions as possible. Drape or pin up material over toy shelves, move any furniture out of the way. A carpeted space is ideal, since many activities require the children to be on the floor. For large groups you will need a space that allows all the children to move about freely, without bumping into one another.

Class Size

Teachers who are beginning to incorporate drama into their curriculum must consider the group size. It is important that your space isn't too large – if it is, you risk losing control of the class. For younger children (3–4-year-olds) the ideal would be to split your class into smaller groups. If you can, try to teach one group while the other is outside with an assistant, or in another room. I appreciate that this is not always possible. For older children (5–8-year-olds) in a school setting, class size is important and you will need to establish clear guidelines. You may need to split the children into two groups for some activities, one group watching as the 'audience' and the other group 'performing'. Be conscious of allowing time for the groups to swap over. As you become more confident teaching drama, you will

find working with the whole class becomes more manageable and enjoyable.

Timing

This is purely up to you as a teacher and will depend on a number of factors. Generally, younger children can easily stay focused for 15–20 minutes of drama, which can be extended to 20–30 minutes as it becomes more familiar. Older children can sustain their attention for 30–60 minutes. But, of course, there is no hard-and-fast rule, and factors such as time of the day, group size, time of the school year, the weather and your energy levels all contribute to the length of the class.

The Freeze Rule

Establish this right from the beginning. When the teacher calls ‘freeze’, the children must learn to stop, look and listen. This will allow the teacher to give the class more instructions, keep the children physically safe and maintain control. Use the freeze rule in every class. You may also like to introduce an instrument for your freeze rule as a variation. Insist that the children do not touch anyone else in the room unless they are instructed to do so. See pages 2–3 for more detail on this technique.

Focus

I always begin every class with the children holding hands in a circle. It brings focus, readiness and a sense of celebration to each class. As the children enter, ask them to remove their shoes and sit in a circle. (It’s also fine to leave shoes on, and may be easier for younger children.) Once the last child has joined the circle, invite the children to stand and hold hands. Ask them to take little steps forward into the centre of the circle (no running) and then big steps backwards. Insist that there is no pulling, running or falling down. Repeat this three or four times. Your class is now ready to enjoy drama. At the end of each lesson, I ask each child to stand tall and take a bow. Encourage them to try bowing as different characters, using different emotions, at different speeds and so forth. Finally, everyone claps and takes a final bow. This ensures that the children experience a sense of achievement, and helps to end the class on a positive note.

Costume/Props

Keep them simple. Too many items or costume pieces will distract the children from the learning. Either elect one item (such as a hat, a cape or a spoon) per child, or remove the costume/props altogether and rely instead on the children's acting (facial expressions, body language, vocal work) to show character, and their mime to show action (such as pretending to eat with a spoon).

Tips for Success

- Be enthusiastic! Participate fully in the lesson, rather than just giving instructions.
- Be prepared to 'role-play'. In some of these lessons you may need to pretend to be a character – a ringmaster, a bus driver, a waitress or a pirate captain. This will come naturally to some teachers, but others may find role-playing takes them out of their comfort zone. You might like to put on a piece of costume (such as a hat, a cape or some glasses) to help you get into character. Start small – try it out with just a few children and increase the group size until you feel confident to role-play in front of the whole class. Take a deep breath, put a smile on your face and go for it. You will find the children's response will be extremely positive and, like anything else, the more you practise, the better you will get.
- Continually move around the space – don't stand in one spot. It may be best if you and the children remove your shoes so you all feel comfortable and ready to create. Stand in the corner of the mat, in the centre of the room, crouch down and gather the children around you. Drama is always very physical, so be mentally and physically prepared.
- Keep your voice interesting. Use a variety of tones and expressions as you teach. Shout out loud, whisper 'secrets', attempt an accent or use pauses and gestures to create interest.
- Practise, practise, practise and play with new ideas. A great way to practise is to read picture books out loud to the class. Play with different

expressions, volumes, intonations and accents. Be sure to try out different voices for each of the characters in the story. Please remember to take care of yourself and your voice. Teaching can become exhausting if you are continually raising your voice to gain the children's attention. Record and reflect upon your practice and be sure to take note of what techniques work best for you.

- Drama is noisy. Be prepared for all the children to be talking at once. This is fine, as long as you have established some simple rules to bring their attention back. You may use the freeze rule, which is explained on pages 2–3. Or, you may use an instrument (a bell or drum) or use a gesture (hands in the air, hands on your heads). But generally, each lesson has the children moving or making sound as a chorus (all together) so get ready to shut the doors and warn the nearby classrooms!
- Most importantly, relax and have fun! Drama has the ability to teach invaluable life skills and I believe it is essential in a child's education, but don't forget that drama is fun. Children are enjoying the experience while they are learning and developing skills. So relax... be prepared for a bit of chaos – and smile along the way. The children will appreciate it and your drama class will be a huge success. Enjoy!

Katherine Zachest

A Note on the Lesson Structure

You'll see that each lesson follows the same structure and I've included extension exercises for the older/more advanced students, as well as extracurricular activities for lessons outside the drama classroom.

Let's Get Started!

This lesson helps to establish dramatic rules and conventions – including the freeze rule and the importance of discussion – and helps the children to understand the way a drama class runs. I'd recommend you start with this lesson. Children explore using their body and voices to express emotions.

Resources

- Music to dance to.

WARM-UP

Warm-up Circle

Make a circle with the children holding hands. Let the children know that they should not fall over, pull anyone's arms or run. Once the students have formed a circle, proceed as follows:

- *Let's take little steps in, in, in. Look how small our circle is!*
- *Let's take big steps back, back, back. Look at how big our circle is!*
- *Remember, don't pull our friend's arms.*
- *Let's take little steps in, in, in. Let's say 'hello'.*
- *Let's take big steps back, back, back.*
- *One more time, coming in, in, in. Hello!*
- *And back, back, back.*
- *Let's let go of each other's hands.*
- *Stretch up as tall as you can.*
- *And now move down as small as you can.*
- *And now can you make yourself stretch out wide. Stretch your fingers out as well and reach to either side of the room.*
- *Good, and now can you cross your arms and give yourself a big hug? Squeeze tightly.*

The Freeze Rule

Ask the children to remain standing in a circle. Once the children are settled, proceed as follows:

- *I'm going to see how clever you are at being a statue.*
- *In a moment, I will ask you to wiggle your whole body, but when I call 'freeze', you have to be as still and as quiet as a statue.*
- *Ready? GO!*

Allow the children to wiggle their bodies for a count of five.

FOCUS

Object Transformation

Remain sitting in a circle. Place a long thin object in the centre of the circle. This could be a long cardboard tube, a child-size broom handle, a metre ruler or a rhythm stick. When the students are settled, use the following instructions:

- *We are going to be using our imaginations a lot more in this next activity. You are all going to have a turn, but we will be coming in one at a time. First, it's my turn.*
- *I am going to pick up this stick and turn it into something else. I want you to try and guess what it is. Are you ready? Okay, here's the first one.*

Mime using the stick as a hairbrush. The children should immediately guess the mime. Try another one. It is important that you keep the actions within the children's understanding. Try actions from everyday activities. Ask the children to guess the mime.

- *Great work. Now it's your turn. I'm going to ask you to come into the circle and pick up the stick.*

Ask the children to enter the space, one at a time, and use the stick as something else. Most children will have an idea of their own, or repeat one that has been performed already. Some may use sound, words or simple gesture and mime. Applaud each child as they complete the activity. It is important that you don't force the children to participate. If any children are reluctant to have a turn, give them time to think about it and offer the option of getting back to them. You may also ask them to enter the circle with a friend and present a mime together. You could also whisper an idea to them or enter the circle with them. If the child is still reluctant, do not force them. They are still learning by watching the other children.

You may need to suggest some of the following ideas:

- o a toothbrush
- o a walking stick
- o a tightrope