

No Toilets for Tigers – An Approach to Drama in the Early Years

Over the last few years, I have been working increasingly within Early Years settings. This work has covered a wide range of contexts, but over the course of these it has been possible to identify an emerging approach. These notes are intended as a description of this personal way of working. Some aspects of this will naturally transfer to other people, and may prove useful. Others may be specific to my own work. It is not intended as a blueprint for the way to use drama with early years, just as a reflection of the way I work myself.

Although it is possible to identify what I do and describe projects in those terms, the important element of the approach is not really contained in specific activities. The range of those activities can be very broad, encompassing games, chatting, pretending, clowning and is probably only sometimes recognisably a distinct arts activity – drama, dance, music. There is seldom anything approaching a detailed plan for any activity, and what happens in each session is instinctive, flexible and unpredictable. What happens tends to be guided by principles, rather than aims or specific content. Having these principles at the front of the mind, and carrying them through very fully indeed is the basis of the ‘approach’.

Analysing these principles after the event they may be something like...

Taking children seriously – trust, respect and belief.

Caring about it all – judging success in terms of changing the world.

Not being afraid of chaos – the creative process can be noisy and messy.

Planning afterwards – a liberating new way of looking at the curriculum.

Being an honorary child - leaping into the child world.

Taking children seriously. Really seriously. Trust the very young with serious subjects, and they will show real wisdom. Children are small human beings who have to live in the same mixed-up world as us, and darkness, fear and sadness are part of their lives as well as fun and colour. If the work we do with them really takes them seriously, it will reflect this. The art that is child art deserves to have the same high standards as any other. The art that comes from children or with children has unique quality that deserves appreciation on the same level as anything.

The most important process in taking children seriously is valuing very highly and responding positively to any contribution they make. Even where, as often happens with the very young, the input from a child is leading off on a tangent, it must be welcomed, acknowledged, and where possible incorporated into what is happening. If a question asked, there should never be a right answer.

Caring about it. Slightly unfashionable and easily said, but one thing that separates work worth doing from the rest, is that at the centre, people really care about every aspect of what happens. There needs to be a point, that point needs to be potentially life-changing. The success is measured in making a difference. Good drama work is an emotional experience, because it is where emotional communication is taking place that some of the most special and enduring things happen.....

Not being afraid of chaos. Sometimes, a group of young children will sit in silence all concentrating on one event or person. But this is not the only situation in which valuable things happen, and success with drama work need not be measured solely in terms of creating this kind of focus. Young children may successfully drift in and out of an activity, or work independently, or move away and copy something from a distance. All of these can mean that the room is noisy. Interventions to keep control can be unhelpful. If the chaotic activity is allowed to continue, it may well be that unexpected creative outcomes will arrive. The moments of group silence and concentration which arise naturally are all the more precious.

Planning afterwards. The younger the children, the less sense there is in having a rigid plan for sessions. But the ‘post-planning’ process provides a wonderful alternative concept for covering things that are on the ‘curriculum’. The idea is to have a loose plan for a session, but allow it to bend with the ideas of the children, and develop organically. Then those involved watch sessions very closely, photograph, record and then analyse closely the learning which has taken place. Time and resources are committed to this process, which happens after every session. Boxes can then be ticked, and the loose plan for the next session can be created in the light of that analysis. This way, over a period of time, a specific curriculum can be successfully covered. The quality of sessions planned in this way is very different from those where there is a specific predetermined area to cover at all costs.

Being an honorary child, There is a description of the role of an artist that comes from the early years work in Reggio Emilia, which says, 'every child should have a crazy uncle' This is the liberation of good drama work with the very young - stepping into, or leaping into a child's world, and enjoying it. A world where the everyday, mundane and ordinary are mixed together with the imaginary and extraordinary, is a really fascinating place to be. The role of the artist feels at its best when it is alongside...when he is an interesting, eccentric friend who joins in and really enjoys what is being created. There is a lot of clowning....the simplest route of all to communication with young children is through playing together....the basics of this play are the same elements as the basics of clowning...mimicry, surprise, falling over, hiding.... An artist can 'carry a clown in his pocket', can be a 'crazy uncle'....

What is clear to me is that belief in children's creative wisdom is not a sanctimonious one, it is real. Imagination is something that they are broadly better at than adults. The process of growing up for most of us is a process of our imaginations gradually congealing. Our solutions to life's problems tend to be much duller.

An exchange in the creative world of the child...

I am with a group of very young children, playing and pretending. We are crawling around, trying to work out how we can escape from a tiger who is chasing us...

'We have to go to Pizza Hut'

'Pizza Hut?'

'Tigers aren't allowed in the toilets in Pizza Hut'

'Why not?'

'There's a boys toilet, and a girls toilet. No tiger toilet'

Of course.. there is no tiger toilet! It's obvious, when you are really in the young child's world - and what a wonderful world it is to be allowed to visit.

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This is a transcript of PWW's contribution to a publication after the first Moonbeams project in 2003

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