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CHALLENGING YOUR STUDENTS, CHALLENGING YOURSELF

The golden opportunity of being an in-school drama educator today

Ailbhe Curran

It was hard to put my finger on what happened that day, but something happened. The children had gone home and I should have now been preparing to tackle the mountain of paperwork I had neglected since undertaking this project with my class. That had been the plan. And I always followed the plan, mechanically dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s in my learning outcomes to prove to the inspector (who could pounce at any time) that I really was a good teacher. But I paused. The space that had opened this afternoon in class seemed invisibly suspended in the air and the endless questions and challenges the students posed started to probe me. My consumed oppositional understanding of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teaching was beginning to blur. I had known this inner struggle for so long, but just now I started to feel more brave, less fearful, more content to challenge it all. The endless box-ticking haze was finally beginning to fade. I rose from my chair, shoved the paperwork underneath it and cleared everything from my desk. A blank space was left, just like the children’s desks, devoid of everything except my present thoughts and feelings. For the first time in a long time, I started to ask myself – Why have I been using my time to tick and not think? Who decided that this had to be the way and what gave them this authority? What really makes a good teacher? Where did my values go in the last few years and why have I felt so removed from them? My young students today had learned that things didn’t have to be this way. And now I, as their teacher, was beginning to feel the same. This was our classroom and we decide what it is meant to be. I was finally beginning to see that my rules were less certain, that change might be possible, and that I could walk out of this room now mentally unscathed, feeling resolute and free of the diligent teacher masquerade.

These lines, written in my reflections during the latter period of a drama education research project with my class, serve to reflect the overarching theme of this essay which aims to highlight the transformative possibilities of engagement in drama education for school educators today. I began teaching eight years ago, with a great deal of enthusiasm and interest, having always dreamed of becoming a teacher and been inspired by other teachers within my own family. Indeed, all the members of my family work in the public service, and I grew up with a great appreciation of the role of public servants ‘on the ground’ in driving social change. Drama education has been a passion of mine as a teacher since I first discovered its pedagogical power over a decade ago. During teacher training, I was drawn to the process-based approaches of Brian Way (1967), Dorothy Heathcote (1995), Gavin Bolton (1979,
1995) and Cecily O’Neill (1995) and the pivotal role of drama education in helping students to “imagine things as if they could be otherwise” (Greene 2000, p.19). In drama education, I learned to facilitate a space where students could enter a different realm of being and in doing so, alter the possibilities of what could be (Greene 2000, 2001). Indeed, it was with this vision to create possibilities and promote freedoms that I entered the teaching profession, only to find, year on year, this vision being slowly but definitively eroded by other influences adopted by and promulgated within the education system.

In Ireland, primary school teachers are trained to teach 11 subjects, with drama education as one of them. They are assigned one class, generally divided into the age groups of between 5 and 12, and teach this one class for at least one school year. The current curriculum, which was last revised in 1999, was highly influenced by the child-centred philosophies of John Dewey (1973), and drama education is included as an arts subject along with music and visual art (Department of Education and Skills [DES] 1999). The subject of drama education developed under this revised curriculum was highly influenced by the theories of Way (1967), Heathcote (1995), Bolton (1979, 1995) and O’Neill (1995) and shifted the emphasis from performance to a more process-centred approach. In Irish schools, each class group’s teacher is primarily responsible for their students’ learning in all subjects including in the arts, and any reliance on outside ‘specialist’ teachers is generally discouraged. Primary teachers in Ireland therefore, at least on paper, appear to have a significant degree of control and autonomy in their work. In the last decade in which I have been working, however, I have encountered the introduction of new curricular priorities and extensive accountability measures which have increased already existing time pressures (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2010) and reduced this sense of autonomy and confidence in our work and role (Ball 2003).

It has been well-established that teachers working in public education systems globally have for many years been under threat from neoliberal influences (Giroux 1983; McLaren 1998; Apple 2013), which threaten to upend the values upon which a holistic, empowering education is based. Indeed, as far back as 1916, the Irish political activist and educator Pádraig Pearse recognised the negative influence of these forces in education in his article titled “The Murder Machine”, cautioning against the conception of education as “some sort of manufacturing process” (1916, p.12). Crucially, Pearse recognised that this conception of education affected not only schools and the development of their students but also the freedom of “the individual teacher” to be an autonomous and liberating force within the classroom (1916, p.13). More than a century later, this concept unfortunately seems to have found root again within many Western capitalist-focused education systems. Ken Robinson, in more recent years, spoke about this “assembly line” (2011, p.57) approach to education, where the focus within this system is on preparing students for their futures as workers and contributors to economic interests, with the arts thus playing second fiddle to the primacy of the primarily cognitive-based learning and achievements of literacy and numeracy. This has been no different in Ireland, where, along with increased accountability measures, there has been a gradual devaluing of the arts in favour of renewed focus on literacy and numeracy (DES 2011a, DES 2011b). This renewed focus has included official guidance from the Irish Department of Education to reallocate time from the “other subjects” such as drama (DES 2011b, p.4) and focus teaching and leadership primarily on promoting “excellence” in schooling, which is aligned with “driving up educational standards, particularly in the fundamentals of reading, writing and arithmetic” (DES 2016, p.61). Within these economically focussed education systems, the value of arts subjects (such as drama) which provide significant opportunity for creative thought, critical exploration of the status quo and the reshaping of
dominant narratives (Greene 2000) has been gradually diminished, thus providing less scope for teachers to facilitate this type of learning within their classroom. There just doesn’t seem to be the time. And it just doesn’t seem to be a priority.

Moreover, as has become apparent in studies of recent years, the current high-pressure, high-stakes system has led teachers to unfortunately become complicit in maintaining this manufacturing process, supported by a system of “technical control” (Apple 1982, p.24). This technical control over teachers takes the form of increased bureaucratic “intensification” (Apple 2013, p.122) of their role through additional emphasis on standardisation and increased reporting, recording and other accountability measures based on particular measurable curricular outcomes (DES 2011b, 2015, 2016). In the process, teachers become increasingly deskilled and disengaged from the immeasurable day-to-day realities of teaching and reskilled “in the techniques and ideological visions of management” (Apple 1982, p.256), reflecting (and subsequently reinforcing) the neoliberal values of the societies which they inhabit (Groux 1983; McLaren 1998; Apple 2013). While one cannot deny the importance of public servants being accountable, what happens when this need for extensive paper-based evidence of our focus on ‘fundamentals’ becomes such a burden as to restrict the abilities of teachers to teach in a more thoughtful and less measured way that really makes change happen? Their creativity, freedom of expression and freedom of thought are substantially hindered under this system, with these neoliberal influences coming to shape the work and identity of teachers today to such an extent that, for some, they have alarmingly become unrecognisable to themselves. As noted by Ball, “it does not simply change what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are” (2003, p.216).

What happened to my creativity? What happened to my professional integrity? What happened to the fun in teaching and learning? What Happened?

(G.E. Johnson, cited in Ball 2003, p.215)

Indeed, these neoliberal influences can encroach upon you and your work as a teacher in an almost invisible manner, thinly veiled within conflicting documents reaffirming the autonomy of the teacher while at the same time reinforcing the need for “performance management systems” (p.25) and robust accountability procedures primarily focussed on the areas of literacy, numeracy and assessment (DES 2015). The promulgation of neoliberal values therefore is hidden under these various guises – where you are told that you are autonomous but you aren’t, where you are told that you have control but you don’t, where you are told that you can practice the arts but you can’t. This is the system. Of course, the real effect of such a system for all involved is exactly the opposite of what was originally envisioned by Pearse – it is the cleverly masked restriction of freedom itself.

It was within this context that I decided to undertake an ambitious research project in 2016 with my class of five to seven-year-olds, who were in their first and second year of formal primary education at the time. The project, which formed part of my MA in Education and the Arts, aimed to explore and challenge the construction of gender narratives (i.e., the particular and differing characteristics attributed to being a ‘boy’ and to being a ‘girl’) in early childhood (Curran 2016). The project was based on the premise that gender is a socially constructed concept and sought to identify and extend the traditionally binary understanding of gender (Butler 1999, 2004; Davies 2003, 2014) with my group of young students. The project had a dual teaching and research focus, aiming to broaden the children’s gender narratives through the use of drama and in doing so help them to see the world in a new way and extend their possibilities. The three specific objectives of the project were
to (1) to explore the emergent gender constructions of a group of school students in their early years of primary education, (2) to unsettle the normative gender narratives of these students and (3) to open spaces for the construction of alternative and multifaceted gender narratives (Curran 2016).

In order to achieve this with the children, I developed post-structural drama approaches drawn from the work of Maxine Greene (2000, 2001), Bronwyn Davies (2003, 2014) and Helen Cahill (2010, 2011, 2012, 2014). I had always been inspired by the work of Maxine Greene and her philosophies, believing in the crucial role of arts education in creating “spaces in which we can live in total freedom” (2000, p.134). During my MA, I also encountered the work of Bronwyn Davies and Helen Cahill, who used drama as a means to challenge normative discourses and generate the creation of new multifaceted narratives. I was particularly influenced by the practice of Cahill, who used innovative drama approaches on a number of different projects, including with pre-service teachers and students and with families in a Vietnamese HIV prevention programme, each time aiming to “enable the participants to grapple with limiting positions and categories provided in the dominant discourses and to re-imagine their futures” (Cahill 2010, p.155). Based on the theme of the ‘superhero’ tale, I constructed my activities with the students on her model of using drama to illuminate our social positioning, deconstruct dominant narratives and open a space which sparks a “change in thinking” (Cahill 2014, p.34). This space would then allow the participants to reimagine their story of self (identity) and their position within society in new ways, ultimately extending their future possibilities (Cahill 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014). This three-stage process involved the use of open-ended questioning (Greene 2000, 2001) and some approaches drawn from traditional process drama (such as still imagery, thought-tracking and teacher/student-in-role) but primarily approaches inspired by Cahill adapted for use with my young students. The use of questioning and reflection, the physical embodiment of different positions and the students acting as spectators to their physical and verbal responses were integral aspects of the dramatic process.

Unlike Helen Cahill, however, I was a primary school teacher in active practice who was undertaking these activities with my own class, with whom I had developed a close positive working relationship. Therefore, I had to examine my own positioning before undertaking the project and become aware of the narratives that had shaped my own identity and thinking too (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Clandinin 2006). This was a project where I, as a teacher-researcher, could only be aware of, but not removed from, experience and story, where I had to live through the stories with my own students and through the ongoing experience of inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Clandinin 2006). Indeed, as a teacher-researcher working with the same groups of students on a daily basis, I was also uniquely positioned to be the primary spectator of these moments of a “change in thinking” (Cahill 2014, p.34) or a change in behaviour drawn from the project. The emergent and complex nature of this project meant that these moments of change did not occur at a fixed time following the project but rather throughout and afterwards, in different contexts and at different times as the students engaged in their constant meaning-making (Greene 2000) with their peers during the course of the school day. And the project, I found, had indeed opened an inquisitive transient space for the students, where different aspects (including those not related to gender) of their status quo were questioned, where the ‘taken for granted’ became less certain and where the students became more comfortable living in a space of multiple meanings and understandings (Curran 2016).

An unanticipated research outcome I had not foreseen at the beginning of the project, however, was the effect on me as a teacher and the neoliberal “status quo” (McLaren 1998, p.167) that had been bearing down on me in the last number of years. My thesis was titled...
‘Unmasking the Superhero’, as a play on the traditionally gendered hero tale, but I had not considered how the dominant narrative of what makes the ‘successful’ teacher today would also be deconstructed. At the end of this project, I too had to reflect on how I had become unmasked. I started to recognise and question the invisible influences which were beginning to reshape my own teacher identity. I started to see the limiting narratives in which I as a teacher had become entangled. And most importantly, if even just for a few moments, I found that I could stop myself chasing the elusive ‘hero’ teacher cape and start to see new pathways to position myself differently on the stage.

This essay opened with a reflection on a moment I had as a teacher-researcher, where engagement in educational drama with my young students which aimed to challenge normative storylines also took me as their teacher on a journey of questioning and exploration around the current narrative of the teaching profession and my position within it. Public school educators today, even guised as facilitators, cannot escape their involvement in this inquiry space created through educational drama with their students. For true facilitation of an empowering learning experience to take place, the facilitator too has to reflect on their position, on their actions, on their dialogue and, indeed, on their silence. The power of drama lies in its ability to devise a space for this deep and meaningful reflection on our circumstances, to spotlight emerging spaces to improvise resistance and to create empowering narratives which allow us to act. By collectively committing, as teachers, to immersing ourselves in drama education of this nature with our students, we are collectively committing to challenging the current status quo of our profession and collectively beginning to truly take control of our own identities as educators, as envisioned by Pearse over a century ago. This is the golden opportunity for in-school drama educators today. And in the current educational climate, I believe that there has never been a more important time to seize it.

References


