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# Using drama in education to develop pre-service English teachers' understanding and capacity in teaching social justice at post-primary level

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## **Abstract**

*One of the most common forms of non-recognition in education is for a group to be generally left outside educational discourse by not being named or known (Lynch and Baker 2005). Addressing inequalities of respect and recognition involves, amongst other things, the development of critical and empathetic perspectives and of educational experiences which enable critical dialogue (Lynch and Baker 2005). This paper examines a project conducted in the University of Limerick in 2010 with a cohort of 3<sup>rd</sup> year pre-service English teachers. The aim of the project was to facilitate an understanding of how drama in education could be used as a successful pedagogical tool for the critique of social inequality issues and the promotion of social justice. Tuition was provided by the author to four pre-service English teachers in both drama in education and development education (with a specific focus on social justice) over the course of a semester. The cohort were then challenged to employ a post-engagement approach to the development of a resource pack which would illustrate how drama in education could be used as an effective pedagogical tool for developing awareness and reflection on a variety of social justice issues. Resource packs developed by the cohort illustrated the capacity of drama in education to act as an effective medium for enhancing awareness and critical understanding in the area.*

## **Context**

“Education plays a major role in shaping the values of our society, particularly for children at a very young age. In our schools and colleges we are helping to create the citizens of tomorrow, and the parents of future generations. It is important that the values which are imparted during the education process are ones which support a just and inclusive civil society which respects and celebrates diversity” (Dempsey 2002, p.1)

From the early 1990s to 2007 an unparalleled rise in the fortunes of the Irish economy and property market was witnessed. In this time, Ireland formerly one of the poorer European states, evolved into one of the wealthiest (Richards 2008). The economic boom resulted in an increase in employment of 650,000, or 55 per cent, between 1993 and 2004 and concurrently the emergence of extensive labour shortages. The demand for labour attracted large numbers of migrants into the country resulting in the end of Ireland's long history of emigration and beginning of a new era of immigration (Hughes et al. 2007). The net inflow of immigrants to Ireland increased from 8,000 per annum in 1996 to 53,000 per annum in 2005. Resultantly, in 2005 over 6 per cent of the population, or 259,000 people, were foreign nationals. Of these, 165,000 were nationals of other EU countries and 95,000 came from outside the EU (Hughes et al. 2007). However, while the economic prosperity witnessed at the time paved the path

to prosperity for many, for others the benefits of the Celtic Tiger were largely illusory with conventional economic indicators failing to illustrate the development of increased societal inequality, marginalization and the erosion of employment security (Hearn 2000, Hearn 2003, Kirby 2002). A growing number of societal challenges were seen to evolve in parallel. Condemning what she termed as the 'vulgar feast' of modern Ireland at the time, Reilly criticised "the rampant unrestrained drunkenness, the brutal random violence that infects the smallest of our townlands and villages, the incontinent use of foul language with no thought to place or company, the obscene parading of obscene wealth, the debasement of our civic life, the growing disdain of the wealthy towards the poor, the fracturing of our community life" (2004, p.1). Challenging the concept of 'wealth' in an era synonymous with material affluence, Cullen argued the economic boom "depleted our true wealth- our health, our society and our environment" (2005, p.39). Within the classroom changes were also evident. The Irish classroom emerged from a characterised homogeneity of student intake (Lynch and Lodge 2002) to an unprecedented level of student diversity. With an estimated 17,000 of second level students claiming a nationality other than Irish (Hanafin 2008), heterogeneity has become synonymous with the dynamic make up of the student population in Ireland, not only in terms of student nationality but also student ethnicity, language, sexuality, religious affiliation and race. In 2008, the lengthy period of affluence enjoyed by Ireland abated and paved the way for a severe economic recession. In the current throes of deep recession following an era of unprecedented economic growth and immigration; unemployment, poverty, crime, racism and social exclusion form significant societal challenges (Bergin et al. 2009, Krawczyk and Ronchetti 2009),

### **The Role of Education and the English Classroom**

People from diverse backgrounds sometimes have difficulty recognising one another as fellow citizens in a community of reason. This is so, frequently because actions and motives require, and do not always receive, a patient effort of interpretation (Nussbaum 1998, p.63).

Nussbaum outlines a significant challenge for educators teaching in classrooms characterised by diversity. The development of inclusive schools which both promote and reflect tolerance, patience and consideration is called upon. However, within the Irish context there exists a significant reluctance to engage with issues of difference in education (Lodge and Lynch 2004). Analysing the historical disinclination to engage with issues of diversity in Ireland, Lynch and Lodge attribute this disposition to the persistence of a 'culture of manufactured homogeneity' (2004, p.3). Within the outlined context differences regarding disability, ethnicity, beliefs, etc. were suppressed in a society in which all people were deemed to be the same (Lodge and Lynch 2004).

More recently calls for change have been explicit with the acknowledgement that the malign impact of inequality in all its manifestations requires attention and action (Lynch 2001, Tovey et al. 2007, Tuomi 2005). However, Simon (2001) contends that moral and existential inquiry remains limited within the classroom. Given that both explicit and implicit reward systems can exacerbate or alleviate the prejudice that underlines social exclusion (Bickmore 2008), there exists a necessity within the

current era of globalisation to ensure the effective promotion of social justice within the classroom.

The English classroom provides a formidable terrain for critical engagement with issues of social justice given that the development of students' linguistic experience is allied with the use of a diversity of texts, materials and approaches (NCCA, 2008). From this perspective it is recognised that English can facilitate the development of attitudes that support "an appreciation of the value of difference, empathy for the experience and perspectives of other people including those who live with the effects of discrimination or inequality" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2006 p.65). Within the English classroom, drama in education provides an effective forum for moral reflection and development as it facilitates the representation of values, ideas, emotions and beliefs through creation, invention and symbolisation (Nicholson, 2000, Pring, 2001). Drama in education provides an active, interactive and reflective learning experience for students based on working cooperatively and engaging critically in role (Baldwin 2008). In an education system charged with standardisation and knowledge consumption (Wilson 2007, Pike 2004), in which it is argued that students are taught to pursue knowledge through objective lenses (Pavlovich and Krahnke 2008), drama in education offers transdisciplinary opportunities for subjective inquiry, affording opportunity to significantly enhance the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of students, yielding new insights and critical understandings (Joronen et al. 2008, Kana and Aitken 2007, Murphy 2007).

Based on the research literature above, this project employed the use of drama in education to engage a cohort of 3<sup>rd</sup> year pre-service teachers with a number of complex social justice issues. This project was constructed with dual ambition, seeking not only to develop pre-service teachers' awareness of a range of social justice issues, but also to provide them with a pedagogical tool which would enable them to facilitate effective exploration into such issues with their own pupils upon graduation.

### **Methodology**

In this project pre-service teachers were challenged to develop their knowledge of a social justice issue of choice. In doing so they were required to construct a resource pack which could be employed by an English teacher seeking to engage a transition year cohort with the selected issue through the medium of drama-in-education. The Transition Year programme aims to prepare post-primary pupils for their role as autonomous, participative, and responsible members of society (Department of Education and Skills 2011). The design and ethos underpinning this programme was therefore deemed conducive to the aims of this project. Students were encouraged to develop a resource pack which would challenge their prospective pupils to feel, think, engage with and critically analyse their selected social justice issue over the course of a double class (80 minute lesson). Supporting the development of this pedagogical tool, concurrent tutorage was provided to the pre-service teachers in the areas of both drama in education and social justice by the author; an English and education tutor at the University of Limerick, over a 12 week period.

### **Developing drama in education skills:**

Tutorials for the module were divided thematically i.e. drama in education, poetry, novel etc. As a result, over the course of the semester students participated in a 6 hour block of drama in education spanning 3 weeks. During this block students were involved in active learning workshops and seminars which sought to engage all three domains (cognitive, affective and psychomotor) while investigating approaches to drama for the post-primary setting. Topics investigated included the nature of the art form; teacher-in-role; depiction; role play and improvisation; fictional framing; circular drama; drama conventions (e.g. hot seating, conscience alley, voices in the head, questioning in role, role on the wall); dramatic storytelling; ways into drama; structuring drama sequences for learning and dealing with social, political and value issues in drama.

In addition students attended a play in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin entitled 'Sticks and Stones'. The play dealt with issues of prejudice and racism. Students were required to complete pre and post engagement written work in order to advance their understanding of the issues involved and evaluate the effectiveness of the play to deal with these issues in a thought provoking and critical manner. Students were challenged to analyse the dramatic techniques evidenced in the play and evaluate the applicability of such techniques for their resource pack. Students also attended a private two hour creative writing workshop given by Irish actress Una Kavanagh in the Roddy Doyle/Sean Love creative writing centre, Dublin. In this workshop students were challenged to develop their drama writing skills through a series of plot development activities which focused on both pre-scripted and improvisational drama.

#### **Developing social justice awareness:**

Students attended two hours of tutorials provided by the author which focused on development education and social justice at the beginning of the semester. The aim of these tutorials was to provide students with the foundational knowledge they would require in order to commence further independent investigation into the area of social justice. The Ubuntu Network provided the ensuing requisite support to the students throughout the semester in the construction of their resource packs. Guidance was offered from the Network on topic selection, analysis, recommended reading etc.

In week 6 of the semester students travelled from the university to Dublin with the author to assist their independent social justice investigations. Students visited the Irish Aid centre which afforded the opportunity to engage with issues of global development such as poverty and HIV. Over the course of the visit students were challenged to re-assess their thinking on key development issues and to reflect on the contribution they and their prospective students could make to development both nationally and internationally. Students then attended a social justice and awareness workshop provided by Amnesty International. In this workshop students were introduced to a variety of pedagogical strategies used to develop post-primary students' critical thinking in relation to human rights education. Subsequent to these workshops students were led by the tutor through a one hour enquiry based tutorial which sought to encourage students to critically reflect on the workshop content. Students were then required to submit a 500 word reflection detailing conceptual connections made between the workshop content and the prospective assignment.

Following the implementation of both the social justice and drama in education module strands, students were challenged to integrate their understanding of both genres to produce a comprehensive resource pack for pedagogical reference. The

resource pack contained all materials required by an English teacher (lesson plan, props, worksheets etc) to critically engage a transition year group in social justice topic of choice using the medium of drama in education. This resource pack was submitted by students in week 13 of the semester.

### **Research Outcomes**

The topics chosen by students for their Transition Year resource packs included; unemployment, racism, homelessness and low income. A brief synopsis of the extended topic rationale provided by each student for their resource pack is delineated below. The drama in education techniques employed to investigate these issues are also noted. Upon request further information on the constructed resources packs may be obtained from the author.

#### **Student 1**

<b>Topic: Racism</b>
<b>Rationale:</b> “I wish to investigate Racism with the learners. The class is one of research, the learners being the subjects and the researchers. We shall examine stereotypes and perceptions through the experience/knowledge of the learners and then challenge those stereotypes based on our further research. I choose racism because it is an issue that is current in Ireland at the moment. The aim of the class is to investigate race and racism and I feel that this can be done in an engaging, enjoyable and educational way through the Drama in Education (DIE) class that I have outlined.”
<b>Drama in education techniques employed:</b> Role play, group performance

#### **Student 2**

<b>Topic: Unemployment</b>
<b>Rationale:</b> “For this resource pack I chose to work on the social inclusion issue of unemployment. Ireland has been working through a recession over the past number of months, and as a result many people have lost their jobs and become unemployed. This makes this issue quite topical at this moment in time, and I feel that it would be beneficial for pupils to learn about the social effects caused by unemployment. Some pupils may know somebody who has become unemployed in recent times, and therefore may be able to relate to the lesson content, and make a connection between the lesson and their own lives.”
<b>Drama in education techniques employed:</b> Role play, group performance, improvisation, interview, freeze frame, plot development, performance analysis

#### **Student 3**

<b>Topic: Homelessness</b>
<b>Rationale:</b> “The reason I chose to focus on homelessness in this resource pack is because I feel that a lot of misconceptions about homelessness and homeless people exist in Ireland. Many people have negative ideas about homeless people, that they are just lazy and are homeless as a result of their own actions. The story of Link highlights how this is not necessarily the case. Many homeless people are forced to leave home due to circumstances beyond their control or because living at home has

become unbearable. By introducing this as a topic to young people and examining it using Drama In Education techniques as is done in this lesson, teachers have the opportunity to challenge misconceptions that exist.”

**Drama in education techniques employed:** Prop box, interview, role play, thought tracking, freeze frame, rippled circle, group performance.

#### Student 4

**Topic: Low Income**

**Rationale:** “The social inclusion issue I have chosen as the theme for this resource pack is ‘Low Income’. The effects of Low Income on education are widely researched and documented. Not only does Low Income detract from a person’s education, it often results in ‘low education’, which in turn results in Low Income, a vicious cycle that is often difficult to escape (Smart, 2008). Since 2007, people from every walk of life in Ireland have been affected by the recession, regardless of their socio-economic background. Unfortunately, many pupils will relate to the theme of Low Income, having experienced it at one time or another. I feel that Drama in Education provides with me a lot of potential for empathy and understanding around this sensitive issue.

**Drama in education techniques used:** Hot seating, freeze frame, scene creation, character creation, role play, prop bag, one word story.

#### Discussion

One significant challenge experienced by the author at the outset of this project was an evidenced reticence of student teachers to engage with the issue of social justice. While informal conversations with students failed to disclose reasons for this disposition, a sense of disengagement with this section of the module was witnessed at the inception of the project. This finding however is not in isolation. Commenting on the ‘worryingly low’ level of interest and activism pervasive amongst pre-service teachers towards developmental education, McCormack and O’Flaherty (2010) identify three inhibitive factors relating to this outlook; lack of knowledge, the perception of development education as subject specific and a ‘not on my list of priorities’ disposition. Of particular note however was the observable development in pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards the project as the semester advanced. While no empirical study was conducted on this affect, greater levels of enthusiasm and engagement amongst the cohort were witnessed progressively by the author as learning amongst the group advanced. Further research into the apparent disposition alteration would be beneficial.

This project also served to highlight the effective reciprocal relationship born between drama in education and development education. Pre-service teachers’ resource packs illustrated a strong degree of understanding of both genres deriving from a concurrent model of teaching. Pre-service teachers highlighted the importance of engaging with the broader aspects of their role in their project rationale and frequently cited drama in education an effective pedagogical tool in assisting them to negotiate what were perceived to be ‘sensitive topics’.

#### Conclusion

The aim of this project was to develop pre-service English teachers’ understanding of and competence in teaching development education to post-primary students. Using drama in education, pre-service teachers were asked to create a resource pack which would challenge a transition year cohort ‘to feel, think, engage with and critically

analyse a social inclusion issue of their choice'. The findings of this project highlight the benefits of an integrated approach to the teaching of drama in education and development education. The resource packs illustrated developed proficiency amongst pre-service teachers in both genres. Rather than acting simply as a pedagogical tool, drama in education, in this instance also evolved as a concurrent area of development. This project highlights the potential for further research into the teaching of development education with and through drama in education and the concurrent potential of drama in education to positively influence the attitudes of pre-service teachers and students towards a variety of developmental education topics.

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