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# Drama in schools Making the educational and artistic argument for its inclusion, retention and development

John Somers



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## Drama in schools

# Making the educational and artistic argument for its inclusion, retention and development

John Somers

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### Introduction

My work in the UK and internationally leads me to believe that we must take steps to strengthen Drama's place in education. If Drama is to expand in education systems around the world, and retain its position in those countries which currently acknowledge it as part of students' curriculum entitlement, leading Drama figures and national and international Drama organisations have to make the case in support of Drama. In addition it is necessary at the school level for the classroom teacher to understand and use cogent arguments for Drama's curriculum inclusion. This is of particular importance in Greece where Drama needs to confirm its right to be in the curriculum and in the UK where, due to the narrowness of the current government's vision of education, it faces gradual exclusion from schools.

### What is Drama?

Drama is a symbolic language with which we represent the "real" world. It allows participants to create models of reality which enable consideration of issues which are located in the wider world. Using Drama approaches, especially improvisation, we can "frame" aspects of life which we wish to examine through the Drama model we create. Although the teacher takes responsibility for the overall structure and organisation of Drama lessons, as students learn more about the Drama languages and how to use them, they develop to a state of autonomy in which they are enabled to use Drama in its many forms to explore issues of their own choice. Drama allows participants to contemplate, explore and confront issues of major importance in their lives. Drama and Art more generally has been used for this purpose for thousands of years and it is clear that, from the dawn of civilisation, human beings have balanced the "real" with the "imaginary" and that the latter forms an essential ingredient in our lives.



*Ancient Mudi yettu ritual giving thanks to Mother Nature, Kerala, India.*



*This cave painting is around 15,000 years old.*

### A brief history of UK Drama in Education

Drama began to be introduced in experimental schools in the UK between the two world wars. At that time nearly all schools adopted a teacher-dominated learning model in which it was the job of the teacher to present facts and the role of the student to learn the given information in preparation for tests which would constantly monitor a child's ability to remember it.



*A 1930s classroom.*

Post WW2, a leftist, Labour government liberalised the school curriculum, changing it from teacher-centred rote learning to a more student-centred approach. The individuality of students became important and the Arts were accepted as essential areas of expression and learning. The new aim was to release and encourage the creative potential of individuals, a tremendous change from the regimentation of earlier classrooms. People such as Peter Slade and Brian Way developed activities based not on direct theatre approaches and scripted plays, but built on the central technique of Drama improvisation. The activity became known as “Drama in Education” or “Educational Drama”. The term “Drama” was used to denote a different kind of activity from “Theatre”. Drama in Education, particularly with young children, used children’s natural ability and need to engage in play, especially as a social activity. Children discover much about their world and the objects and people in it through the processes of play. Play is a natural – and necessary – physical and mental activity. We accept it in childhood, but the imagining of “other” in our lives is essential for adults too and through drama we can achieve the state of “alterity” – the state or quality of being other.



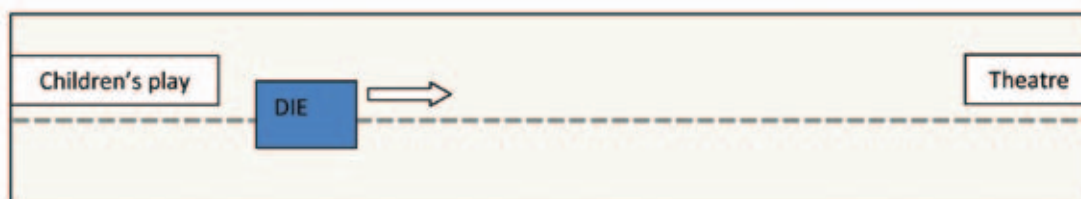
The aim was not to make performances, although these could be a product of children’s sustained drama improvisations, but to use Drama as an exploratory medium. Unlike the traditional, static learning environments, Drama involved students in bodily – kinaesthetic – as well as vocal expression.



*Child dancing in a 1940s Drama lesson.*

#### *The play/theatre continuum*

Many would see Drama in Education as part of a continuum that runs between unadulterated children's play and pure theatre. With young children there is a natural link with play.



As students mature, there is a gradual shift from drama as organised play to a greater awareness of its potential as a communicative medium – theatre. The teacher needs to be aware at what point she/he is working with students at any one time.

In the UK, since the Second World War, Drama was introduced into all secondary schools and most primary schools. It has become an examination subject like most other school studies and eighty-four higher education establishments offer degree studies in Drama or Theatre Arts post eighteen years of age. It established itself as an important element in the curriculum and extensive research, regularly published in dedicated journals, shows the value of Drama both as an educational medium and as an artform in its own right.

In the UK the current, right of centre Government has signalled a “back to basics” policy, laying emphasis on mathematics, foreign languages, English and the sciences. It is also reverting to a traditional, formal examination system. Drama does not appear in their curriculum planning and, already, some schools are not replacing Drama teachers who leave. This is a serious threat to Drama's continued presence in the education of our young people and it is likely that other right of centre governments will refuse to contemplate Drama's inclusion in school curricula.

#### **Arguments for Drama's curriculum inclusion:**

Those of us who value Drama and are familiar with its tremendous contribution to students' development, need to take action to secure Drama's continuance. We need to become persuasive agents in a campaign on many fronts and levels. I suggest that the following points can be used to justify Drama's curriculum inclusion:

1. Research evidence supports Drama's effectiveness as an education medium. Journals around the world – including those published in Greece– carry articles which show this.
2. Students' have an entitlement to access the Drama artform as an important part of our cultural language and landscape;

3. Drama makes a legitimate contribution to a rounded education;
4. It opens up career opportunities;
5. It ensures cultural enrichment;
6. Drama is built on and develops the participants' creativity, a much-needed human quality;
7. It increases student confidence;
8. Students become makers of art, not just receivers/buyers;
9. Participants may progress to access our rich theatre heritage;
10. It has huge interdisciplinarity potential.
11. Drama is a social, negotiated artform – at a time of increasing social fragmentation, it requires and nurtures important social skills.

### **Evidence to support Drama's curriculum inclusion**

There is a great deal of research evidence to support Drama's inclusion in education curricula. The journal which I founded in 1996, *Research in Drama Education (RiDE)* carries many articles which authenticate Drama's claim to be an effective and valuable educative medium (see <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/crde20/current>). A particularly useful publication, reflecting research undertaken in twelve countries, is *DICE: "Drama improves Lisbon Key Competences in Education"*. It shows how 22 competences are increased through Drama's use in schools. A summary of its important points can be accessed at [http://www.dramanetwork.eu/key\\_results.html](http://www.dramanetwork.eu/key_results.html)

### **What is the main advocacy objective?**

To ensure Drama's continued development we must increase the visibility of Drama at all levels and amongst diverse groups of people. This needs to be done in a context of widespread ignorance – even amongst other teachers – of what happens in Drama lessons, what the learning aims are and of the research results which show the benefits of Drama. Given the embedded skills possessed by Drama teachers and the visual and vocal nature of the Drama work produced we are in an ideal position to shape presentations for different groups to whom we wish to deliver the "Drama message".

### **Who needs to get the Drama message?**

#### *Students*

If they have access to a basic understanding of Drama's theoretical justification, the students we work with in schools can be strong advocates of its usefulness. As students' interest is a sure indicator of an activity's worth, make sure you collect and make available students' endorsement of Drama activities. Currently in the UK Drama is an entitlement for all school students – from 5 years to 14 years of age. Drama classes usually attract healthy post-16 numbers in the UK. To counter the mistaken view that only those who wish to pursue a career in theatre should follow Drama courses, it is essential that we emphasise Drama's ability to develop skills which are of value in general life: confidence, bodily awareness, communication skills, creativity, presentation skills, social skills, co-operative abilities, flexible thinking, self-reliance and organisational skills being among them.

#### *Other teachers*

Do not assume that the staff you work with understand what Drama is. If they have not encountered it in their training or subsequent practice, they may have only a scant knowledge of Drama's educational and artistic theories. When decisions are made within schools, their support of and knowledge of the educational benefits of Drama can be crucial to its curriculum inclusion.

#### *School management*

As they have a role in resource decision making, the school principal and other management team members should be enabled to understand Drama's educational role and purpose. Likewise, the Parents Board and the Local Educational Committee will make decisions which can dictate whether Drama is offered and recognised in a school.

#### *Education administrators*

They often control the policies and finance which influence what happens in schools. Key people in the Ministry of Education and at a regional level, the Prefecture Directorates of Primary and Secondary Education should be identified prior to intended communication.

*Politicians*

Identify the key local politicians who have a responsibility for education and, more specifically, the Arts and discover how they can be approached for possible lobbying and attendance at meetings, events or performances. Discover which national politicians will make decisions (sadly, often from a position of ignorance) concerning Drama's role in schools. Ensure they are suitably informed.

*Parents*

They may not be aware of their sons'/daughters' involvement in and attitudes towards Drama. Students are potentially the most numerous and effective advocates for the subject, both through the skills and enthusiasm they display at public Drama events or through their daily contact with family members. Schools are increasingly sensitive to parents' views on the quality of the education their children receive, and their main source of information is their daughters and sons. Parents also vote in local and national elections and at many levels, their positive attitudes to Drama can be influential.

*The general public*

Their knowledge or ignorance of Drama can be crucial. They vote in politicians who espouse particular educational policies. As with most other groups identified here, generally, their perception of Drama will be that it is about performing plays. When decisions are being made about the content of the curriculum, they and others may feel that this is properly an extra-curricular activity. They need to know that, whilst public performances may result from Drama, this is not the whole story or main purpose of Drama's curriculum inclusion.

*Teacher trainers*

They prepare teachers for work in schools and their ignorance of Drama leads to new teachers who are also ignorant of how Drama can assist in enriching students' education.

*The theatre community and the universities*

There are thousands of skilled and trained people in these categories in Greece. Make the connection between your workplace and theirs and use their enthusiasm and skills in your schools.

**How can you shape the message?**

You need a range of material and strategies to enable the advocacy of Drama. You will be able to develop "core material" which would be useful in a number of different contexts mentioned above, but ideally, each message should be tailor made for the particular groups you approach. It will be necessary, for example, to contemplate what criteria the groups use in judging whether education develops the skills, knowledge and attitudes each expects and to address to what extent Drama helps to achieve these. I suggest here some of the forums in which the message can be delivered.

*Meetings*

Ask for time at key staff and parents' meetings to explain what activities take place in Drama and the basic theories which underpin them. Before you speak, be sure of Drama's aesthetic and pedagogic philosophies. Your confidence and brio in delivering the message will be as important as the message itself.

*Website*

Set up an effective section of the school's current website where Drama information and news can be posted. Include photos, video and the comments of students – current ones and those who have moved to the next stage of education or work.

*Photographs and video*

Build a store of high-quality photographs and video clips which can be used in promoting Drama. Make use of students, teachers, parents and community members who shoot and edit video or take good quality photographs.

*PowerPoint presentations*

Create high quality slide presentations which can be adapted for use in a variety of contexts. Learn the basic skills of good presentation, among them, not just speaking to repeat what is shown on the slide, but amplifying the message on individual slides.

*Leaflets*

Design and produce attractive flyers and leaflets which can be distributed at events or at key points in the school year. Include appropriate quotes from students and involve them in the design and production. Make the leaflet production a “school project” and involve Information Technology and Visual Art specialists in the design and production. Discover if particular parents have skills which might help with the actual printing of the leaflets/flyers.

*Posters*

If events are open to other members of the school community or the wider public, produce attractive and well-designed posters and ensure that they are displayed in key positions in the community and in the school. Use a data projector to project a big poster image on a light-coloured, large surface where people pass by. Alternate the poster image with photos from rehearsals and key phrases from the script or students’ comments to achieve an interesting visual format. Use freeware such as “Photostory” to achieve a more sophisticated effect.

*News outlets*

Publish articles in local newspapers and magazines. If there is something particularly newsworthy, attempt radio and TV coverage. Provide high quality photographs. Invite journalists to events and offer key students and staff for interview.

*Newsletters*

Send newsletters home with students giving information about Drama activities in school – topics such as new facilities, the work of current students, theatre visits and ex-students’ success, for example. Make sure these – and all other communications – are of high graphic and content standards. Use student-written material and copy from a range of other sources.

*Open evenings*

Hold Drama “open evenings” which include a range of activities shown by students who also explain what they are doing and why. Provide refreshments and try to ensure a senior member of staff is present to address the audience on Drama in the school. Organise a VIP session where important people who might influence the future of Drama in your school are present. If you do persuade a VIP to attend, ensure you get good media publicity. Remember that school managements like positive publicity for the school. Get students – past ones too – to present aspects of the argument for Drama.

*Research and evaluation*

Make a special effort to trace research which proves the benefits of Drama. Prepare a digest of this material and issue this on well-designed double-sided A5 sheets with the research evidence on one side and news of school Drama activities on the other. The Hellenic Theatre/Drama Education Network should be able to advise on suitable research and evaluation material. Conduct your own evaluations of student attitudes to Drama. If you are unsure how to do this, approach the Network.

*Special events*

Combine with teachers from other schools and from teacher education, universities and drama schools to present a special day of talks, demonstrations and displays of photos and videos. Try to get a VIP to open it as this attracts extra publicity. It will also encourage school senior management people to attend.

*Special guests*

Invite special guests to speak about Drama – actors, directors, academics, ex-students who are working in Drama, film/video makers, prop makers, make-up artists, mask-makers, puppeteers etc. Also invite those not working in a Drama-related field but who feel Drama helped their personal development. Plan a rolling programme of such presentations and advertise them widely.

*Improvisation to performance*

In addition to any scripted work, make sure you develop performances which grow from the normal work in drama lessons. Show how simple Drama exercises can develop across time into full productions made by the students. This builds on the sustained creativity of students and counteracts the assumption that, when public performances are required, established scripts should be used.

*A space for Drama*

Try to get a specialist room in which the Drama activities can take place. Over time equip it with the necessary blackout, lighting, sound recording/playback and video equipment.

*Seek assistance*

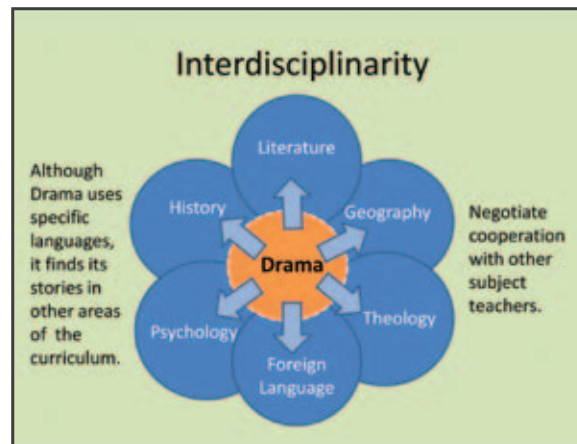
Invite parents and others in the community with suitable skills to help with Drama activities. They could, for example, help build rostra and staging, raise money to buy lighting or sound equipment or make blackout curtains for the Drama room. They may also possess skills which are useful to you and your students, so send home letters seeking information on Drama-related skills.

*Technical aspects*

Teach the technical skills too – video and photographic shooting and editing, lighting, sound etc. If necessary, organise fund-raising activities to buy extra equipment. You may be able to find equipment which is redundant due to changes in other organisations, so use letters to parents and media publicity to seek these resources. Remember that all technical equipment, especially any electrical items need expert safety checks before use – especially if students will use it.

*Work with other teachers - Interdisciplinarity*

Ask to speak at appropriate staff meetings and explain the basic philosophy of Drama and how its learning process differs from but complements the work of other curriculum subjects. Cooperate with teachers of history, geography, sociology, Greek literature, foreign language learning etc to plan lessons which complement their objectives.



Although the languages of Drama are particular to it, it often finds its topics and stories in other curriculum areas – philosophy and sociology, for example. The diagram shows this, with drama being the shaded, central area. Work with teachers of the other arts – music, visual art and dance – to plan curriculum work with shared content and objectives. In addition to obvious curriculum objectives, show how Drama activities help to deliver more general educational, social and career aims.

*Workshops*

Run Drama workshops for other teachers, parents and other local people. Base this work on the philosophy which guides your work with students but use adult topics and content to avoid adults playing children's roles which, for the inexperienced, often leads to comic caricature. Although you may be the overall leader of these sessions, employ students to run parts of the sessions. If there is sufficient interest, set up a regular meeting in which these activities can be extended.

*Visits*

Plan visits to see other forms of Drama. Go to other schools and to universities, local theatres and important national theatres. Ensure the productions you will see are of good quality and try to make the visits relevant to the students' level of Drama development. For example, if you are teaching mime skills to a particular year group, take a trip to a mime show and try to ensure your students get to talk to the performers after the performance.



*Theatre companies in school*

Invite (good) touring companies to perform at your school and, in addition to performing, try to get them to lead workshops for students. If finance is a problem, approach potential sponsors, especially those businesses in the local community which have parents and students as customers/clients. Approach arts organisations and education administrators to discover other possible sources of funding. If an organisation provides support, wine and dine the sponsor and invite them to the event. Acknowledge their help in all publicity you issue.

*Conferences*

Attend and speak at relevant conferences and seminars. Identify more experienced teachers of Drama who can help your development. If you are experienced, offer help to less-experienced teachers – in your school and beyond. Build a professional and artistic profile for yourself ... and make sure your senior management team know about it!

*Co-operation with universities*

Work with students and tutors in higher education establishments to plan a “Drama experience” which is developed by Higher Education students and delivered to your school students. Target universities which have Drama/Theatre courses and teacher education establishments. Ensure this is of value to the Higher Education people as well as to you and your students. Offer, for example, to speak to their staff and students about Drama in the school curriculum.

*Take students' work into the community*

Take your students' work into hospitals, children's homes, residential care centres for seniors, youth clubs etc. Make performances for national days and for younger students, linked to their curriculum studies. These projects should be firmly based in the products of the lessons you teach to ensure a steady stream of appropriate material. Make sure you negotiate the nature of the work with your hosts in order that the intervention can be of maximum mutual benefit.

*Stretch the able and interested students*

Start a special Drama Club for students who are particularly interested in Drama. Consider supporting senior students in leading younger students in Drama activities. Plan a residential week in an education or arts centre and organise a series of Drama activities there. Be aware of courses and workshops attendance at which might benefit your students. Co-operate with other Drama teachers to run a special weekend course for able students from your schools. Using email, YouTube and other social media, build networks of common interest.

*Exhibitions*

Keep an effective record of the activities you undertake, including documents, photographs, videos etc. Hold regular exhibitions in a prominent part of the school building. In addition to static exhibition screens and noticeboards, project a video or stills of Drama work in large format on an entrance hall wall, for example, or run a series of displays on portable exhibition screens. Try to get these displays into the community – arts centres, community centres, shops and libraries, for example.

Negotiate the use of other display areas in the school buildings. Use novel ideas for display – for example, large mobiles using photos and word images which spring from particular activities; video screen displays; live, short performances by students in areas where people pass by; students wearing sandwich boards moving around the school areas at break/lunch times; flash mob events.

*Cultural entertainment*

Run a fortnightly lunchtime or, for older students, after-school one hour entertainment. Invite students, staff, parents and other locals to contribute arts, literary and similar input. Aim for variety of content – a student group sharing Drama work, students singing or playing music, a teacher speaking about and reading poems he/she has written; a local author reading an extract from her new book; a parent who shows photographs; a local musician who plays and sings; a parent who collects old story annuals; a dance troupe who perform two traditional dances, a student who performs a monologue she/he has developed. Organise a varied programme and keep each act to around 10 minutes to ensure variety of content. Organise an evening cabaret with acts by students and teachers. Give it a theme and ensure the entertainment, food, room layout and decoration and the costumes of those attending match that theme.

National and International organisations can strengthen your will and knowledge.

Make use of the HELLENIC THEATRE/DRAMA & EDUCATION NETWORK. Become a member of IDEA and other international and European Drama organisations.

Some of these ideas may seem a little fanciful, but I have used most of them in my long career teaching Drama in schools and university. If you as a Drama expert do not promote Drama in your school, it is unlikely that anyone else will. The arguments justifying Drama's right to be part of students' educational experience are persuasive and, given the active, visual, vocal and creative nature of Drama, we are in a good position to shape the work we do to create persuasive material to strengthen Drama's educational role. Good luck, and if I can help, please contact me.

**John Somers** is a freelance theatre maker and writer and an honorary fellow in the Department of Drama at Exeter University. He retired from the University on 2005 but works extensively abroad (Finland, Palestine, Poland, Greece, Czech Republic and Turkey in 2011/12) and in the UK. His award-winning Interactive Theatre programme "On the Edge" toured nationally for six months and was commissioned by *Rethink* as part of its "Time to Change" anti-stigma mental health campaign 2009/10. He also originated a new Interactive Theatre programme on stress and suicide in the veterinary profession, performed in 2011 and 2012. John was Dean of the Faculty of Education in the period 1992/95. He makes original theatre in communities and has created and directed ten original theatre projects in East Devon as Artistic Director of Tale Valley Community Theatre (see tvctheatre.org). He is the founder editor of the research journal "Research in Drama Education" (1995), founder director of *Exstream Theatre Company* (2002), founder of the Exeter MA Applied Drama degree (1999) and founder director of the Exeter international drama research conference (1996). He is the holder of the 2003 *American Alliance of Theatre in Higher Education Special Recognition Award*. John has published widely in research journals and books.

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