

# Drama in Education

As schools have become more aware of their role in addressing personal and social issues, the importance of ‘values and attitudes’ has begun shaping education and curricula worldwide. *Drama in Education* explores the six fundamental pillars of the national curriculum guide of Iceland in relation to these changing values and attitudes.

Focusing on the importance of human relations, this book explores literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity. It demonstrates the capability of drama as a teaching strategy for effectively working towards these fundamental pillars and reflects on how drama in education can be used to empower children to become healthy, creative individuals and active members in a democratic society.

Offering research-based examples of using drama successfully in different educational contexts and considering practical challenges within the classroom, *Drama in Education: Exploring Key Research Concepts and Effective Strategies* is an essential guide for any modern drama teacher.

**Ása Helga Ragnarsdóttir** is an adjunct lecturer in drama and theatre education at the University of Iceland, School of Education.

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The book *Drama in Education: Exploring Key Research Concepts and Effective Strategies* tries to connect the academic research-based approach with the practical value of drama. Our education system was created for different times and so, towards the end of the second decade of the 21st century, we must explore how to transfer it for a new era – the age of constant, overpowering changes. To deal with them effectively, we need different personal and social skills which drama can develop. The book responds to the needs of the modern educational and cultural system offering academic evidence of drama impact and power as well as creative ideas for teachers to use in the classroom. It discusses the concept of fundamental pillars for education which are linked to different aspects of using drama in the classroom. The book is divided into six different chapters which are linked to introduced educational pillars. The international authors present different perspectives and experience in researching and applying drama.

**Prof. Dr hab. Alicja Gałązka**, *University of Silesia, Poland and Trinity College, London, UK*

There is no shortage of books advocating drama as a powerful medium for learning, developing social skills and promoting equality and social justice. In less abundance are publications which support their claims for drama's efficacy with empirical evidence. This is just such a book. The foreword focuses on the importance of considering context in research and this is acknowledged by each contributor as they set out their research projects. Their findings are all the more convincing because they include details of the practical sessions that provided the empirical evidence. Although each chapter describes a small-scale piece of practical research the number of issues covered is comprehensive ranging from how drama can be responsible for measurable improvements in literacy and reducing bullying to integrating immigrants and challenging the destructive rise of new nationalisms. This book will inform and encourage drama educators everywhere and serve as an inspiration to those wanting to regard their own practice as a potential subject for research.

**Andy Kempe**, *Emeritus Professor of Drama Education, University of Reading, UK*

# **Drama in Education**

Exploring Key Research Concepts and  
Effective Strategies

**Edited by**

**Ása Helga Ragnarsdóttir and  
Hákon Sæberg Björnsson**

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# Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	ix
<i>List of tables</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	xii
<i>Foreword by Peter Duffy</i>	xv
1 Introduction: Fundamental pillars of education	1
ÁSA HELGA RAGNARSDÓTTIR	
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Literacy</b>	3
2 Learning language through drama	5
RANNVEIG BJÖRK THORKELSDÓTTIR AND ÁSA HELGA RAGNARSDÓTTIR	
3 Performing literacy and social media	22
KRISTIAN NØDTVEDT KNUDSEN AND DANIEL SCHOFIELD	
<b>PART II</b>	
<b>Sustainability</b>	37
4 Artful teaching of drama-based storyline	39
ANNA-LENA ØSTERN	
<b>PART III</b>	
<b>Health and welfare</b>	55
5 Advancing social and emotional well-being through drama	57
HELEN CAHILL	

- 6 'I am just talking and talking. I have to stop, but this is so funny':  
Stories from immigrant students in drama classes 75  
ÁSA HELGA RAGNARSDÓTTIR AND HAFDÍS GUÐJÓNSDÓTTIR

**PART IV**

**Democracy and human rights** 91

- 7 No direction home: Process drama as a response to new  
nationalisms 93  
PETER O'CONNOR AND MOEMA GREGORZEWSKI

**PART V**

**Equality** 109

- 8 Drama, diversity and equality: Working creatively together towards  
social inclusion 111  
JO RAPHAEL
- 9 Imagining the possible: Using drama for gender equality in schools 128  
CHRISTINE HATTON

**PART VI**

**Creativity** 147

- 10 Living through creativity 149  
ADAM BETHLENFALVY
- 11 Drama, inclusion and development of play competence in  
kindergarten 163  
MERETE CORNÉT SØRENSEN
- 12 Conclusion 179  
ÁSA HELGA RAGNARSDÓTTIR

- Index* 180

# Figures

2.1	The number of correct answers on vocabulary tests by students, prior to (pre) and after the experiment (post) for the group using drama to teach <i>Egil's Saga</i>	12
2.2	Number of correct answers on vocabulary by students, prior to (pre) and after the experiment (post) for the control group using teaching methods not involving drama to teach <i>Egil's Saga</i>	12
2.3	Number of correct answers on vocabulary by students, prior to (pre) and after the experiment (post) for the group using drama as a teaching method to present the legend <i>Iðunn and the Apples</i> from Nordic mythology	13
2.4	Number of correct answers on vocabulary by students, prior to (pre) and after the experiment (post) for the control group using teaching methods other than drama to present the legend <i>Iðunn and the Apples</i> from Nordic mythology	13
2.5	Book cover of <i>A Giant Love Story</i>	20
3.1	#iLive screenshot	26
3.2	QR-code	30
4.1	A model supporting dramaturgical thinking in education	44
4.2	A ritual performed at the final event, the talk show, remembering those who lost their lives in the events explored	50
11.1	Collective Zone of Proximal Development	165

# Tables

2.1	One-tailed distribution Critical value = 5%	14
2.2	One-tailed distribution Critical value = 5%	14
9.1	The girls' responses at different times in the dramatic process	140
11.1	Dramatic play competences. Structured registration 1	168
11.2	Role in play group. Structured registration 2	168
11.3	The Menu model	174

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July 2019

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# Foreword

## Drama, new contexts and creating for tomorrow

*Peter Duffy*

Context matters. Context fuses a present learning moment with past knowledge and prior experiences. Context orients how humans construct meaning, how we agree to organise information, and how we experience the world. Context is the bedrock of understanding and without it experience and new knowledge float about aimlessly. Context is how people within any given culture understand the parameters of that culture by learning its rules, organising principles, affinities, allegiances, beliefs, behaviours and relationships. Context frames the noise of our world so we know where to look and how to listen.

In his essay 'Context and thought' what noted American educational philosopher John Dewey said about language resonates beyond word recognition to a much richer understanding of context and sense-making.

We grasp the meaning of what is said in our own language not because appreciation of

context is unnecessary but because context is so unescapably present. It is taken for granted; it is a matter of course and accordingly is not explicitly specified. (2008, p. 4)

What Dewey describes here challenges a field like drama education that depends on context. It is easy to say a classroom context, or, more specifically a Year 5 classroom context and leave it there. Knowing that a drama lesson took place in a Year 5 classroom is contextualising, but it is not context. Or, to use Dewey's understanding, knowing that a research project took place in a Year 5 classroom provides insight, but that is more like a matter of course. It does not explicitly provide the rich details that outline the contours of the experience.

Yet, as all good drama practitioners know, to do drama work well, we can never leave it there. Drama is a lived art form and must be experienced corporeally to be understood. Writing about a drama lesson and conveying its context explicitly presents challenges. The learning moments that transpire through drama are all at once ephemeral, affective, social, aesthetic and cognitive. How can one situate insights gained through a well-placed drama strategy or an in-role writing exercise when context unfolds in the doing? How can an author adequately

convey what emerges from and within socially-attuned drama spaces? It is impossible to capture fully the complexity of drama work in words.

That is true because context is situational and relational. It is situational to know, for example, that the participants with whom one works are all asylum seekers in their mid-20s who are learning English. Such circumstances of the group (age, genders, relationship to the place of the workshop, economic status, school status, etc.) provide important information for facilitators to consider when planning a workshop. But of course this information is not specific at the interpersonal level and is not the whole story. The situational elements of context represent the group's particulars that could apply to a number of individuals or groups. Relational elements represent how the group's situational contexts manifest. It could be argued that it is situational that I identify with my biological sex, male, but how I express maleness is relational. That comes from my relationship to others and to myself.

Within drama education, relational domains come from people cooperating to create a *dramatic elsewhere* (O'Neill, 1995). Drama is different from conventional classroom engagements as the students work within fictional frames. Students often show up differently within a drama. Even if the classroom teacher 'knows his or her students', how the students collaborate and who they allow themselves to be within the collaborative drama-making process creates new relational dynamics – even within long-standing groups. A participant's new relational dynamics might be previously unknown to the facilitator or teacher. The emergent aesthetic selves revealed through drama complicate an already challenging environment. Without the drama work, classrooms already house the bullied and the bully, the unrequited and the disinterested, the extravert and the introvert all within one space. Classrooms contain the hungry and the privileged, the neglected and supported, the powerful and the dispossessed. The *relational* plays itself out unpredictably and mercurially. All teachers know that their classrooms are complex sites of human experience and negotiation. And as Dewey reminds us, that is often taken as a matter of course. The matter of course is known, but incomplete.

Viirret (2018) offers a useful way to think about this incomplete matter of course. She elucidates the emergent within groups by borrowing from the work of phenomenologists Maurice Jean Jacques Merleau-Ponty, Martin Buber and Edmund Husserl. Viirret describes the relational aspects of people using the term intersubjectivity to demonstrate that when people work together, they are not simply one individual imagining the intentions of others (having 20 different dramas playing out in the heads of the 20 students who participate in the same drama lesson, for example) but are, in a real way, responding to the brainwaves of others (which is the domain of brains working collaboratively and subconsciously). This is what cognitive scientist Uri Hasson (Hasson et al., 2012) calls brain-to-brain coupling. More than people 'working together' the phenomenon of brains, in essence, syncing adds another, much richer way of exploring context. Context is more than just one's subjective experience of an experience; it is intersubjective in that it depends on the whole group to create

the context. Facilitators will often say when a new person joins an already existing group it is a whole new group. Now we know that is scientifically true. The people in the room matter deeply and how they generate context could become a rich area of research.

Context exists on several planes three-dimensionally: the group's social/relational context, the drama's fictional context, the context of leadership and power-sharing, environmental contexts, political contexts, contexts of gender and identity, and facilitation contexts, to name a few, all emerge in drama's richly complex, personal and symbolic meaning-making. Each of these contexts is deeply considered and reconsidered within the pages of this book.

The push and pull of the relational and situational natures of drama complicate writing about the work. The emergent personalities, relationships, backgrounds, understandings, abilities, knowledges, emotional and psychological needs, and ... and ... and ... cloud a researcher's ability to capture the true essence of a drama experience. Often, it isn't until the workshop is over that a facilitator gains any understanding of the environment in which he or she worked. What is more, we will never fully understand context due to a variety of reasons including the group's unspoken intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1991), inclinations, preferences, abilities and willingness to participate. Kathleen Gallagher (2014) drew upon Daniel Yon's (2000) apt phrase 'networks of meaning' to capture the relational aspects that emerge within groups (p. 120). These networks transcend the demographic rollcall that permeates some research – i.e. twenty 13–15-year-old-students overall, 11 students of colour (4 boys, 7 girls), 5 white students (1 boy, 4 girls), etc. Of course, naming who is in the room is not identifying what happens in the room. Moreover, simply naming the emergent relational moments of the drama does not capture the networks of identities and positionalities. The situational and relational contexts of drama work are not neat. They are not tidy assessable bits of information that can be evaluated by answers on standardised tests. Context as a network is an apt way to describe what scholars wrestle with in their research. Context connects and binds. It emerges and holds, and it shatters as quickly as it appears.

The creation of context through drama is a phenomenology that is endlessly fascinating and devilishly difficult to research. And yet, that is what these researchers attempt in this volume. *Drama in Education: Exploring Key Research Concepts and Effective Strategies* centres on the connections among drama in education and six key educational research concepts: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity. Each chapter can be read multiple times, each time with a different focus. They can be mined for examples of research or drama practice or reflective practice or community engagement or inquiry into the relationship of gender or special needs, for example. And perhaps as enriching for our field, each offers a variety of contexts thickly described (Geertz, 1973 by way of Ryle, 1971). The thick description of their research sites, the participants, goals of their research, etc., serve as useful examples for our field. At a time when drama-based research looks more and more to mixed methodologies to fortify our inquiry, fewer and

fewer authors provide their research output with the thick description it deserves. This is due in part to journal word-limit constraints. By the time an author describes the methodologies used, explains the data and writes the conclusion, that author is already butting up against a 5,000–7,000 word limit. Context's complexifying details are often the first thing cut. There are excellent examples of mixed methods in this book where the authors here demonstrate the use of quantitative data as a way to develop the context of the work.

Thorkelsdóttir and Ragnarsdóttir describe drama interventions to teach vocabulary through traditional Icelandic folktales. The description of their drama practices amplifies our understanding of student learning and also how drama can teach students about themselves and their world. The innovative mixed methods utilised in these two research projects will certainly be replicated by other authors as well. How they married qualitative and quantitative methods enriched the telling of their research story and deepened our understanding of the goals and context of this work.

Knudsen and Schofield challenge researchers to reconsider the contexts in which we work. They describe a digital context that is often taken as a matter of course in our work. They ask resonating questions such as 'What is literacy and how can we reimagine current drama practice in a way that embraces the digital landscape?' Cleverly, they extended my reading context by integrating technology in their chapter.

Østern wonders with the reader how practitioners can implement dramaturgical thinking to contribute to artful teaching and learning through drama-based storylines. Østern frames her discussion through performance inquiry and details richly the learning benefits for students. Her discussion of student learning extends beyond the classroom to the larger world. 'This dramaturgical thinking is influenced by awareness of cultural differences as strong performative agents. Changes in society are also strong performative agents in dynamic learning events' (p. 45).

Cahill picks up themes from the book as she masterfully addresses the internal contexts of students through her rich description of an anti-bullying project she designed. She demonstrates how purposefully implementing drama activities can help students and teachers alike to know the contexts of bullying differently. This chapter illustrates ways in which each of the conventions can frame different kinds of thinking work, inviting students to variously use the drama to depict and describe, to

experience a range of situations, to rehearse key communication skills, and to think from multiple perspectives as they analyse and critique the influences on social behaviour. In this, the learning activities exemplify ways in which a class might simultaneously be at work to develop their social and emotional capabilities and their creative and aesthetic capabilities. (p. 64)

Ragnarsdóttir and Guðjónsdóttir describe teaching in an Icelandic context that is changing due to immigration. The description of their drama practices amplifies our understanding of student diversity and student learning as well as

the multiple contexts in which they work. They employed narrative inquiry to explore the impact of four drama practices (roleplay, improvisation, body language and freeze-frame) and help immigrant students learn a new language. This chapter not only provides well-researched and reported findings but also shows how the world is changing all around us and how drama can be an important tool to deal with the lived reality of this change.

From her first sentence, Hatton foregrounds drama's importance as a method to understand our changing and intersectional world. '... drama is at its most powerful for participants when it is probing the details and complexities of the human experience' (p. 128). Hatton challenges drama researchers to understand and disentangle the complex dynamics that gender brings to our inquiry.

In everyday life (and drama education and research, I would add), gender is often

normalised and sidelined as a theme or lens, as it can be assumed to be a part of the natural order of things. Gender stereotypes can flourish and be reinforced in drama processes rather than questioned, deconstructed and resisted.

This critical insight and call to understand this context should push our field for some time to come. I hope it does.

O'Connor and Gregorzewski write about how process drama they conducted with teachers at the Sydney Theatre Company provides a forum for the discussion of sensitive political issues. Through their comprehensive writing about their work, they show how drama, again, becomes central to the work of understanding our world and the complex people in it. They write about democracy and the geopolitical context of a drama workshop. They remind practitioners of the systemic potential of our work and how the universal lives in the particular. This chapter is enormously useful to help us understand the broad and yet specific contexts in which we work.

Raphael's chapter draws upon two research projects that brought together people with and without disability. In one she worked with actors who live with and without a variety of disabilities to create a piece of theatre that taught preservice teachers about barriers to inclusion and inclusive education practices. Methodologically and ethically rich, Raphael's chapter shows how these two research projects have profoundly impacted teachers and communities, and also of the rich and rewarding art making that can come when we question contexts and who does and does not belong in creative spaces.

Bethlenfalvy's chapter on creativity offers rich context for practitioners who find themselves wrestling with the distinctions between teaching about the art form of theatre or using drama structures to explore other content. He admits that the tension is often coarsely distilled to *process vs. performance*. He challenges the context that separates process from performance and challenges practitioners to engage creativity discourses when planning their own work. Asking practitioners to reconsider theatre education's well-delineated contexts and reimagine what is possible within our work, he asserts, 'the question of how drama education and theatre art connect is always a useful problem to explore' (p. 161). This idea of

reimagining what is possible within our work is a consistent theme in the book and one that must be asked time and time again for our field to progress.

Sørensen describes an action research project she created concerning kindergarten bullying. She wondered whether the development of drama skills among the children in a kindergarten group might contribute to their play competence and inclusion. By shifting how teachers engage in pretend play and drama, and by wondering how drama can enhance a child's play and vice versa, she recontextualises the role of drama within kindergarten, reframing how it can be used as a pedagogical tool. Through her example of young children coming to understand bullying through drama, she augments drama practices for practitioners who work with preschool students.

In each chapter of this book, the authors bravely challenge readers to question assumptions about the sacred cows of theatre education. What is more, the authors show how the field can move in new directions to meet the demands of a new generation of children facing a world that is uncertain to all of us. This has always been the call of drama – to image the world differently and to image how it can be otherwise. Enacting that change can be challenging, and shifting perspectives on contexts can at times feel threatening. However, doing the hard work of examining as much of a context as we can possibly understand will yield essential fruit that will be challenged by future generations of theatre practitioners. I am grateful for this call to more thoughtfully and bravely engage in my work. With these new contexts, I will work with new understandings to learn where to look and how to listen.

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# 1 Introduction

## Fundamental pillars of education

*Ása Helga Ragnarsdóttir*

Education is a lifelong process. It is important that schools encourage their pupils' initiative, their enjoyment and enthusiasm for studying and thus promote their education. Various ways described on how to achieve this goal in the National Curriculum Guide of multiple countries are common for preschool, compulsory school and upper secondary schools. Emphasis is on flexibility and continuity in the educational system, both in content and working methods. Additional emphasis is on school development and general professionalism of teachers at all levels.

The role of teachers is crucial for any education system as they undertake various important tasks within schools, such as teaching, administration, upbringing, counselling, research and development (The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). The quality of education and the success of the school system is first and foremost based on well-educated and enthusiastic teachers at all school levels. Teacher professionalism is vital for pupils, their education and welfare. Teachers have the obligation to share knowledge with students, provide them with the opportunity to acquire knowledge and nurture their creative and critical thinking.

Extensive societal changes have taken place in the 21st century. With the expansion of globalisation, the ever-growing importance of the Internet and the exponential growth in computing power, the world is changing fast. The opportunities and challenges for young people today are radically different from those faced by previous generations. The same is true for modern education. As a result, a paradigm shift can be seen in educational research and practices, with increased emphasis on creativity, critical thinking and cooperation rather than rote learning.

As schools have become gradually more aware of their role in addressing personal and social issues, the importance of these 'values and attitudes' mentioned above has begun shaping education and curricula worldwide. As a result, schools around the world have introduced certain **fundamental pillars** which are intended to become the guiding light in the general education and be visible in the content of subjects and subject areas. The fundamental pillars refer to social, cultural, environmental and ecological literacy so that children and youth may develop mentally and physically, thrive in society and cooperate with others. The fundamental pillars also refer to a vision of the future, ability

and will to influence and be active in maintaining society, change it and develop. They should cover all school activities and shape practices and schooling with the goal of delivering well-educated pupils into the community, reduce discrimination and class divisions and ensure all participation in a democratic society.

An example of these fundamental pillars can be found in the national curriculum guide in Iceland. The curriculum guidelines are based on six fundamental pillars which are interrelated and interdependent in education and school activities. These fundamental pillars of education are: **literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, creativity** (The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011) – all subjects that almost every country cares about and wants to flourish in their schools.

This book is divided into six parts, corresponding to the aforementioned fundamental pillars. Each part includes research-based chapters by experts in the field of drama in education, linking drama in education with the respective pillar. Subsequently, the experts provide practical examples of how drama in education can be used effectively in accordance with the research findings. The book's purpose is to demonstrate the capability of drama as a teaching strategy when studying important personal and social issues while simultaneously making it accessible for everyone interested in using it.

The research findings in this book suggest that using drama as a teaching strategy provides teachers and other educators with a basis for working towards the aforementioned pillars. Learning through drama gives students ample opportunity to exercise critical thinking and creativity through cooperation while simultaneously allowing them to reflect on, and gain a deep understanding of themselves, their peers and society as a whole. Furthermore, it seems that drama charms the students and gives them increased satisfaction and interest in the studies that take place in schools. If the use of the drama contributes to the increased satisfaction and joy of students in solving tasks, as many of the chapters indicate, it would be desirable for drama to have more space in schools and hopefully be a motivation for teachers to use drama more and more in their work.

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# Notes

## Chapter 3

- 1 For a complete oversight of all the characters, see Knudsen, 2018.
- 2 A QR-scanner can be downloaded for free in one's preferred app store (Android/iOS).

## Chapter 4

- 1 My translation of the original title in Finnish 'Kasvatus ekokriisin aikakaudesta'.
- 2 <http://docplayer.net/10355788-Combining-art-and-science-through-the-scottish-storyline-method-in-explorations-of-themes-connected-to-water-locally-nationally-and-globally.html>.

## Chapter 10

- 1 For an in-depth analysis of Bond's theory read chapter 2 in *Living through Extremes* (Bethlenfalvy, 2017).
- 2 In earlier writings Bond calls these moments Theatre Events, but later moves to Drama Events when he differentiates theatre and drama as genres and uses the latter for his work.
- 3 The in-depth research and details behind the arguments can be read in the PhD thesis (Bethlenfalvy, 2017) that is available online.
- 4 I only used some images to create the reality of the problem, but not the story of Oxana Malaya. You can find some images here: [https://www.google.hu/search?q=Oxana+Malaya&rlz=1C1GGRV\\_enHU751HU751&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi2ydzsz8HdAhWRl4sKHeGFACAQiR56BAGIEBY&biw=1366&bih=626#imgrc=tmVetYn3x6OnhM](https://www.google.hu/search?q=Oxana+Malaya&rlz=1C1GGRV_enHU751HU751&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi2ydzsz8HdAhWRl4sKHeGFACAQiR56BAGIEBY&biw=1366&bih=626#imgrc=tmVetYn3x6OnhM).
- 5 There is a list of seven strategies and examples from plays as well as performances that could be useful background information for the facilitator, so she/he can offer examples: Bethlenfalvy, 2017, pp. 77–90.
- 6 Data collection methodology and detailed analysis of the quotes are available in Bethlenfalvy, 2017.

## Chapter 11

- 1 All statements from interviews are translated into English.

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