**Chapter 15**

**Neuro Dramatic Play and a Hero’s Journey, a Play Based Approach in a UK Junior School**

**Clive Holmwood**

**Introduction**

The obvious nervousness was etched onto their young faces as they stood in front of me pensively in the middle school hall. It was a Wednesday afternoon, in September, they stood silently awaiting instructions at our very first meeting. Some children could barely speak they felt so anxious. One or two spoke, “What are we here for?” asked one, “To see a play, I thought ...” said another. A third child played nervously and excitedly with a ball, whilst waiting to start. I was a teacher, I explained, but a different sort of teacher to what they might be used to, I had come to play, make stories and go on an amazing adventure, using drama; through which we could carry out an exciting research project and learn some new ideas about play together [[1]](#footnote-1).

Over the next 50 minutes, the apprehensive faces of 11 young people aged between 8 and 11 began to ease as we played a series of warm up and introductory games. We threw balls to each other, created emotions and feelings with the help of the balls, ate giant imaginary pieces of toffee and began to walk through snowstorms, quicksand and forests. The playing of games and standing in circles and natural rhythms of the group’s movements and actions seem to allow young people to gain a greater sense of self and body awareness. As Russell Meres states the ‘inner life, which we sense as insubstantial, is founded on physical things such as toys and parts of the body (2005 pg.3). Through creativity, touch, objects, rhythms, group cohesion and a physical grounding and awareness of the floor beneath their feet, the children, had by the end of the session come alive, their obvious worries had lessened and some of them could even smile.

This chapter aims to consider the principles of neuro-dramatic play – (NDP) (Jennings 2011), as a form of pre-therapy/ structured interventional play. By running nine sessions with a group of 11 children (Years 4 to 6, 8-11-year olds), all of whom had been handpicked by school staff due to confidence and self-esteem issues, we were to explore the notion of NDP as an effective form of play-based intervention. By allowing the children to build bridges with each other through the play and going on a fantastical and dramatic hero’s journey together, we considered the appropriateness of NDP as a way of supporting the confidence and self-esteem of a small group of middle school age children in the UK. I used a combination of a practitioner, action-based research (Whitehead & McNiff 2006) from an empirical perspective, acknowledging the importance of children playing an equal role in the project as co-researchers (Kellett 2005).

Two major theoretical ideas relate to this work. Firstly, as already mentioned, Jennings (2011) ‘Healthy Attachments and Neuro-Dramatic-Play, (NDP). Secondly, the concept of the ‘Hero’s Journey’ (Campbell 1993) in which he considers the concept of the ‘monomyth’ – the concept of the hero going on a journey, who undergoes a range of challenges and returns somehow changed, which has similarities to Van Gennep’s (1960) ‘Rites of Passage.’ I will also consider, later, the notion of attachment and Bowlby (1988) and his concept of ‘transitional object’s, using large puppets throughout the project and on the journey with the children, which became a key part of the research findings.

**NDP**

Sue Jennings, one of the early pioneers in play and dramatherapy describes NDP as ‘a new synthesis of several approaches to child development that include our greater understanding through neuroscience of the complexity of early brain development...’ (2011 pg. 28). Jennings has developed these ideas since the mid 1960’s alongside the development of play and dramatherapy. It is based on the notion of sensory, rhythmic and dramatic playfulness, that are part of normal and healthy early childhood development; specifically, ‘from conception to six months’ (2011 pg. 33). From the womb the baby can feel the warmth of the mother whilst encased in a liquid membrane. The very first rhythm it feels is the beating of the mother’s heart alongside that of its own. From birth the baby interacts with the mother (or care giver) whose face is inches away as it is held, safely, in their arms after birth. So sensory rhythmic and dramatic play and interaction acts as part of a baby’s earliest experiences and assists the notion of feeling safe and contained from conception through to birth. Its brain development and neurology are all based around these basic instinctive (hopefully positive) experiences and sensations. This has particular relevance in relation to Porges’ Polyvagal Theory (2015), which suggests that children who are in a high state of distress rely on their nervous system and senses to understand the world around them as thinking, psychological processes shut down. Jennings describes this reliance on the nervous system as being akin to the ‘Theatre of The Body or Theatre of Life’ (ToB), (2011:16) The natural process of a child’s development which she describes as being preventative and (usually) supports positive early attachments between child and care giver. Equally she describes ‘Theatre of Resilience’ (ToR) (2011 pg. 16), which plays a similar role in early childhood development, but is more specifically therapeutic in that it supports the social development and awareness of the child from birth onwards, especially if the child is anxious or has developed attachment difficulties due to early adverse childhood experiences.

Jennings also parallels the notion of Embodiment Projection Role (EPR) (2011 pg. 17) alongside this, which is a developmental play based paradigm that can be used to assess a child’s natural development, from early messy play with slime or flour and water (Embodiment), the playing with objects and beginning to make stories (Projection), to fully formed characters in dramatic play and actions (Role). By the time a child is six, most children unaffected by trauma or negative early childhood experiences, will have easily developed through to the ‘Role’ stage. Noticing the child who has not naturally progressed to this level might suggest early experiences have held back this natural process and may suggest a ‘stuckness’ that requires additional support.

Jennings stresses that NDP is not in itself therapy but might be used by therapists as a form of assessment or as part of their work. Moreover, it acknowledges and echoes the natural, rhythmical development of the child. When a child is stuck and appears unable to develop this might be when more specialist interventions might be required by play or other arts therapists or health care professional. NDP as a process is not therapy, not invasive and not investigatory, it is something that can be used by any competent and skilled practitioner within a general child and adolescent population to assist their natural development.

**Monomyth & Rites of Passage**

In his now classic and seminal work ‘The Hero with A Thousand Faces’ (1993), originally published in 1949, Campbell argues that almost all stories follow a specific universal pattern of events. He describes the hero’s journey as a tri-partite progression that he called, departure, initiation and return, beginning with ‘a call to action …’. He has entitled this notion the ‘monomyth’. Campbell openly acknowledges the connection between his work and that of Van Gennep’s ‘Rites of Passage’ (1960). Van Gennep, the celebrated twentieth century anthropologist also noticed a pattern in behaviours when working with indigenous peoples who would often send a male child/adolescent out on hunting trip who would then return changed and matured (it was almost always males), having killed an animal. Van Gennep described these as three phases: pre-liminal, liminal and post liminal (from the word limen, meaning threshold). These could be more easily described as separation, or death - to the old way, when the ‘call to action’ comes, the transitional phase is the test or activity the individual is set, then finally incorporation, or re-birth, the individual returns triumphantly and has been changed due to the experience or the journey they have been on.

We can see this tripartite phase in most modern human social activities such as a wedding for example. The groom would go from being a bachelor, ‘separation’ from being single, the ‘transitional’ or liminal state - the wedding service, through to the ‘incorporation’ when he is reborn in a new union as a husband to his new partner.

This tripartite notion of story is not unusual, as famously discussed by Bettelheim (1976), with its safe boundaries of beginning, middle and end, as used in this project with middle school children who all have confidence and mild anxiety issues. Using notions of NDP, Campbells Hero’s Journey and Van Gennep’s ‘Rites of Passage’ the children will in one sense, unknowingly, through play be allowed to playfully test out their capabilities, build confidence and overcome challenges through drama to hopefully come out the other end, reincorporated into the school, but also transformed and reinvigorated.

**The School**

Having worked in schools as a registered dramatherapist for many years (Holmwood: 2014), it was challenging for me to return to a school in a slightly different role, as Neuro-Dramatic-Play Practitioner, not as a therapist. The boundaries are in one sense looser, there is no clinical application, issues around confidentiality are not as cogent or essential as might be required in therapy – pupils were at liberty to walk back to their classes and freely share with classmates the nature of the journey we had been on that day. I was not there as a therapist, nor was the work therapy, but it had the potential to be therapeutic. The challenge for me as practitioner was to remember the specific role I was to play, which was primarily as instigator of a great adventure!

I was fortunate to be able to run the group with a specialist school mentor, who worked in the school, she knew each child, had experience of working with children with mild to moderate difficulties, and had been involved in handpicking the group on my behalf and organising them for each visit. Having a key person in school to support the work when my own time was very limited was essential, and I was indebted to her for this support.

The school was on the outskirts of a regional city in England. The children themselves came from a range of both white, Asian and mixed Afro-Caribbean heritages. Some of them could be described as coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. The area itself also had major pockets of social deprivation[[2]](#footnote-2). All the children had some issues that related to their general confidence. Several of the girls, including a small group of Asian girls, were described as very quiet in the classroom, as were some of the boys. One boy appeared to be autistic, this was confirmed to me by the school mentor. He talked a lot, was loud, got frustrated easily, frustrated others, and would go into minute detail about such things as black holes and the stars and the science behind them, even when science was not central to the discussion. For example, when we pretended it was snowing in the introductory session, he would insist on explaining scientifically the shape of snowflakes. Another boy had been described as having odd thought processes, would rarely speak and when he did much of what he would say would make little sense. He was as yet undiagnosed, but school felt there was probably some sort of mental health issue underlying the way he thought and spoke. The group were a cross section of children that might be found in any classroom, anywhere. I was not (in this instance) a therapist, nor was I here to assist with or fully understand the complexity of issues that might also be around for some of them. I was here to facilitate an adventure through which it was hoped they would gel as a group, develop confidence and camaraderie and most importantly do this by using play and drama (from an NDP perspective) whilst having an enjoyable and exciting time.

**Fear and Monsters as a Path to the Children’s’ Journey**

As is the unpredictable nature of schools for our second session we were out of the school hall and in a rather cramped classroom. This happened on numerous occasions throughout the project. The children had been asking all week about my return, which was positive. Week two was ‘feelings week,’ and I introduced the notion of things that ‘frighten’ us. Fear is not necessarily a negative experience. In fight and flight mode the adrenaline is released by the body to assists increased heart rate and blood pressure (Van Der Kolk: 2014 pg. 46). Children like scary stories. In the average child the adrenaline release is temporary and helpful, it allows them to learn when they should be frightened and run away, and when they should not. Jennings’ echoes this by stating that ‘the development of our brains and the maturation of our emotions are therefore dependent on early playful attachment’ (2012 pg. 38). Learning about fear is part of this process. We explored dark haunted houses and graveyards at night. The autistic boy relished in frightening others with stories of monsters who ate flesh and even, if you were not careful, someone’s heart.

I also introduced the central aim of the rest of our work, the idea of going on a journey, but more importantly, the companion who was going to go with us – a monster, called ‘Sam’. McCarthy (2007) was an advocate for the monster being in the play space and a central focus to Jennings NDP approach is the idea of mess *and* monsters (my italics) (2012). Additionally, the use of large puppets allows children to anchor their attachments, or as Winnicott would describe it use them as transitional objects (2005), the notion of human experience that exists between the inner and outer world of the infant, the me and not me. Sam, luckily in this case, was to be a friendly monster, so giving the children an alternative perspective to notion of fear and being frightened. Sam was a round velvet, soft to touch, androgynous large purple monster with a large mouth and eyes that allowed him/her to squeak as the mouth opened and closed. S/he had a small mop of purple hair with a small neat bow in it. As I pulled Sam out of the bag and introduced her/him to the group there was an audible ‘aaah’ from around the room. Everyone took turns holding and stroking Sam as he/she was passed around the circle. Not only did Sam fulfil the notion of being an attachment figure, the soft touch of the fur allowed each child to intimately connect through touch with a monster that was neither male or female, so disposing of gender stereotypes, but also was not scary. Sam would be coming on our journey and so was central to the process. Whilst in clinical settings monsters might represent aspects of the child or clients own ‘monster’s’, this is not the intention here from an NDP point of view, as Jennings describes it Sam represented ‘affection and affirmation through sensory methods’ (2011 pg. 166).

INSERT HERE FIG 15.1 SAM

Sam had been an instant hit with the children. Each week the ritual began by removing him from the bag of toys and allowing him to be passed around the circle for each child to touch and stroke and speak to[[3]](#footnote-3).

**A Call to Action …**

During session three I introduced three concepts which we would work on in the reaming sessions:

* Leadership
* Creating a map
* Making props

Firstly, the notion of leadership. We discussed what it meant to be a leader and I asked who might like to lead the group when we went on our adventure. To my surprise almost everyone put their hands up, including the boy who was almost always very quiet and vacant. He was unable to articulate what it meant be a leader or how he might lead, but the point that he had put his hand up was very encouraging.

I had already decided that all the children would be given, if so desired, a chance to lead part of the adventure. I had always been interested in Dorothy Heathcote’s notion of ‘Mantel of the Expert’ (O’Neill 2015). Heathcote was one of the UK’s foremost drama in education teachers and very enlightened in the area of giving children the responsibility to manage and run aspects of drama classes themselves. She described this as the notion of the ‘‘Mantle of the Expert’ where the class is set a task in such a way that they function as experts’ (O’Neill 2015 pg. 44). Heathcote goes onto say that ‘good ‘interior form’ can never have a ‘wrong’ external pattern’ (2015 pg. 44). In other words, embedding the notion internally of taking empathic responsibility for others around you will always lead to positive external outcomes. This seems akin to Jennings notion of EPR, Embodiment, Projection, Role – the idea that the forming of attachment is a natural developmental process, and that giving children the ‘role’ of leadership, at certain times assists with this natural internal/external connection. They at once come to see leadership as both caring for others and being cared for by others. There does appear to be strong theoretical connections between Jennings’s ‘NDP’ and ‘EPR’ and Heathcote’s model of ‘Mantle of the Expert.’

This notion of leadership or taking the lead was echoed in the next decision explored by the group – the idea of planning their own journey by creating a map. The notion of creating maps is nothing new in education, for example it is used in teaching reflection at graduate level when training arts-based practitioners (Parker-Eames 2019). In this case it is used to develop the student’s individual creativity and confidence, and to allow them to individually, physically and externally create and embody their ideas whilst working on a project as a group. The very notion of using crayons, pencils, paints, messy play, creating bright colours and shapes is central to NDP. It also developed and heightened their ability to negotiate who would draw what and where, especially when drawing together on one large piece of paper. The group made a collective decision that their journey would be to an island. Once started, the group could not stop their ideas for the island adventure flowed out, they included: mermaids, dolphins, dragons, jungles, woods, black holes, volcanoes, stepping stones, rivers, swamps, as well as good and bad monsters to name but a few. There was no end to the creative ideas that the children had in imagining where they might go and what they might do

INSERT HERE Fig 15.2 The Map

It was at this stage I decided to introduce a second attachment monster figure, ‘Alix’ the snake. Alix was again, neither male or female, but was a five-foot-long soft, green, velvety, friendly snake with a red tongue a mouth full of teeth and big eyes. The group responded to Alix equally as well as they did Sam. Alix too would be coming on the journey with us. I hadn’t realised the significance or importance of the roles played by Sam and Alix until much later. They represented what Bowlby described as an ‘attachment figure’ (1979). He hypothesised throughout his work that for a child to feel secure and confident they needed an appropriate attachment figure, from birth (usually the mother, or parent figure) who was available to them who they could connect with both emotionally and physically. Sam and Alix became the attachment figures for the group. They could hold and touch Sam and Alix, stroke them, speak to them, knowing that Sam and Alix were available and safe whenever a child wanted to pick them up or ask a question and wait silently as an answer was whispered into their ear. They also had to learn to be patient and share them. I also introduced a bright yellow stress ball with an emoji face on it. Group members loved to squeeze it and in one case one child continued to squeeze the staff members arm after he let go of the ball.

The final element to our adventure was the props, the practical objects that would help us on our journey. The group agreed we would need to make things such as torches, not just modern electric torches, but ancient medieval ones, sticks with fire on the end made of orange and yellow paper, so that they could see in the dark. They also needed shields and backpacks and even sandwiches and burgers in case they got hungry on the way. The group spent two weeks making the props. This was an important part of the process, we used cardboard, scissors, glue felt pens and paint. The children found the cutting and manipulating the material, sometimes hard, but the staff member who supported me felt they worked better than some other children in the school at this. The mess of making things, the physical touch, the cooperation between group members, sharing materials, the frustration when it didn’t always go right, were all part of the integral physical and embodied experience of preparing to go on the journey. Akin to the idea of actors rehearsing for their first night. All of this is paralleled Jennings’ notion of sensory and messy play in which she states

‘messy play is a means of discovering order: by making a mess I can learn limits, containment and borders. It is also a means of developing sensory play and may continue in some form into adult life.

(2011:71)

Jennings also reminds us that messy play is not necessarily chaotic play. Through the mess and chaos of playing with various materials we can eventually find boundaries and order.

In order to create even more excitement and a sense of adventure the group agreed we would arrive on the island by boat, a boat in which the group like in a Viking long boat would row towards the island, something we practised several times, with some group members being given the role of Captain and helmsman. Finally, and even more excitingly in order to create absolute ecstasy and direction on the adventure the group were going on a hunt – for treasure!

**The Hero’s Journey**

I made a conscious decision to not rehearse our adventure, other than, rehearse rowing in the boat, deciding who was going to lead each section of the journey and then decide the route of the adventure. I hadn’t even told the children where the treasure was to be located. The adventure itself was going to be completely improvised and be a one-off experience (Johnstone 2017). There was the potential for it to be messy but hopefully contained. Though it wasn’t a performance, we decided not to open it up to other staff or pupils to watch, the only person present was a member of staff taking a few photographs on behalf of group members. I had provided a structure and hoped that the children would take responsibility for the sections they were to lead, and that the improvisational nature of play would become ‘*running play,* arms outstretched, faces joyful’ (Italics original) (Slade 1995 pg. 74) as Slade, the drama educator once described it.

‘Arms outstretched and faces joyful’ (ibid) was, in the end a very good description of the performance. I played the role of director of the adventure, I moved around with the group and suggested what might come next. Various group members and I held Sam and Alix during the adventure. One of the girls was the Captain and began to find her voice as she barked instructions to the group on the boat, others steered the boat and let down the anchor on arrival.

The adventure was an onslaught to our senses. We avoided icebergs and mermaids, walked through gardens filled with poisonous flowers, relaxed briefly on a sun kissed beach with good monsters, crossed a slippery bridge, went over stepping stones, past bad monsters and went through a jungle with an angry monkey in it. We manage to pass an exploding volcano and a fire breathing dragon, who we befriended, crossed a dessert, went through a forest and avoided a black hole and aliens. Finally finding the treasure, a blow-up treasure chest covered with a cloth. We made our way back to our boat and left the island having survived. Each and *every* child took responsibility for leading a part of the adventure, in itself a major achievement. I gently guided when necessary. On arrival back from our adventure we opened the treasure chest, each child (unknowingly) had an emoji stress ball, chocolate money and sweets to take home, after all it was two weeks before Christmas, and the children deserved the treasure they had so valiantly gone on the adventure for. The stress ball being their own permanent reminder of the adventure, and maybe a help in the future.

INSERT HERE Fig 15.3 The Treasure Chest

The adventure had been a great success. One of the quiet girls who had played the captain on the boat declared afterwards she had found her voice. My colleague from school assisting me said that the quiet boy with the strange thought processes had taken part so well in the project, she was so pleased and surprised. She said, ‘in the classroom he is doing nothing; almost nothing at all.’

**Conclusions and an Unexpected Outcome**

It was mid-January when I met the children for the final time to carry out a feedback session. At first, they were quiet and withdrawn. It was a struggle to get anything from them as we sat in the school staffroom, the only room available for us to meet in. It was as if all the work we had done only a few weeks earlier had evaporated into the air during the Christmas break, which of course it might have done.

In hindsight, I had completely forgotten the structure of our sessions as I had been so focussed on getting raw ‘research data’ in the form of verbal feedback. At that moment, in desperation, I opened my bag and pulled Sam and Alix out; suddenly everything changed. On seeing Sam and Alix the children came alive they wanted to hold, stroke and talk to them. The noise in the room went from silence to excited chatter in a matter of moments on Sam and Alix’s arrival. They had their anchor, their attachment friends, something that was familiar that had held them as a group. The children then freely spoke and shared their thoughts and reflections on our work as they passed Sam and Alix around the room and touched, cuddled and chatted with them. There reflections flowed out and are recorded below:

INSERT HERE TABLE 15.1 Children’s Responses

It is clear from these comments that the project has been successful for these children. In one sense there is nothing ground breaking about what the children have said. Play is central to children’s development and growth, an established fact that needs little quantifying here. It also suggests that a relatively short-term piece of work, which is relatively inexpensive can have positive benefits for children in school, on the margins, who might not otherwise have received additional support due to scant resources.

It also opens the wider debate about what should be central to primary and middle school curriculums in an era when the education system is becoming much more concerned about traditionalist approaches to education, which include the need for rote learning and knowledge and is less concerned about the progressive educational policies and approaches of the past (Holmwood: 2014). The children’s comments could arguably suggest that a more playful, progressive experiential and embodied approach to learning, as suggested by people such as Heathcote and Slade, would be helpful in today’s digital world. It was particularly noted in relation to the boy with strange thoughts, that in the classroom he barely functioned and did nothing at all, yet in the group with peers he somehow appeared to come alive and participate in a way he had not been able to in class.

More central to NDP, the focus of this chapter, is the obvious importance of the large attachment puppets. Even as researcher myself I had forgotten the absolute necessity that the children had in needing to feel grounded, not only in each other, but more importantly, with their large attachment puppets. Jennings notes this in the importance of ‘Theatre of the Body’ (2011 pg. 18). She discusses the idea of ‘’thinking with the body’, ‘body intelligence’, (and) body memory’ (2011 pg. 19) and ‘that the body is a primary means of learning’ (ibid). One wonders whether the notion of ‘mirror neurons’ might also play a part here, (Chasen: 2011), the idea that additional mirror neurons fire when young children observe certain actions, something that is repeatable and held in memory. Does the proximity, size, colour, shape and texture of the attachment puppets, with big eyes, mouths and teeth, create an imbedded memory for each child of what it was like to be cared for as a tiny baby. The ability to touch and interact with the puppets clearly had an impact on the whole group throughout the process, and during the chaotic times of the adventure, they would turn to them for advice. They only came awake and alive again in the final session when the puppets re-appeared. Maybe their mirror neurons were again firing, reminding them of their previous adventures as well as lost early unconscious embodied memories.

This notion of the large attachment puppet is certainly an area worthy of further research and development, and both its place in the classroom as well as less formal play environments. It fits alongside the notion of Jennings’ ‘Theatre of Life’ and ‘Theatre of Resilience.’ This small-scale project has reminded us of the importance of play and that play *is* education and is central to all children’s natural development and growth. I very much hope that I can begin to develop research into the notion of attachment puppets in many more classrooms, schools and educational settings in the future.

*I am indebted to the pupils, the specialist mentor and the school for allowing me the privilege of working and researching together with them.*

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1. Written ethical agreement and approval had been sought and granted from both the school, the children’s parents or guardians and each pupil had also given verbal consent to attend. They were free to leave at any time and return to their classroom, in fact only one child left throughout the process of the project. Ethical approval had also been sanctioned and approved by the University of Derby where I work as a Senior Researcher and Associate Professor in professional practice in the Department of Therapeutic Practice. The project was also part of my training in Neuro Dramatic Play – NDP. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Specific information does exist on the social deprivation in the area but is held back here to maintain confidentiality. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Using a multi-sensory bag would be even better, a bag with shape colours and textures in which the attachment figure could come from and return to would benefit the work further. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)