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**Social distancing without Emotional distancing?**

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**ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of society and no more so than in educational applications of theatre for children in schools. This article explores the complexities of what applied theatre/drama offer the young to think critically and develop empathetic human relationships crucial to sound mental health. The article’s authors reaffirm ways in which applied theatre/drama and TIE have contributed to healthy social development through contributions to the Personal, Social and Health Education curriculum. Cited are recent projects with compromised praxis in the face of the pandemic. Identified is a shift in educational priorities that are returning to traditional approaches in place of wider heuristic social education. Consequent moves to online teaching and imposition of social distancing has led to concerning levels of social distancing potentially impacting negatively on mental health of the young. However, applied theatre/drama disciplines play a particular role in facilitating emotional maturity through critical thinking.

***KEY WORDS***

Emotional Distancing

Applied Drama

COVID-19

Social Distancing

Arts Education

Emotional Maturity

Creative Thinking

Mental Health

**Introduction**

There is no doubt that the impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of our lives has been hugely pressurizing, and has exposed the underlying inequalities not only within specific communities but society as a whole – none more so than within the education system. Young people’s anxieties caused by a mixture of isolation, missing exams, and eighteen months of disrupted education have contributed to increased demands on the mental health services available for young people (Robinson, 2021) It has also impacted on the lack of opportunities for young people to engage and enjoy theatre and drama in the classroom.

We maintain that the value of participatory applied theatre or TIE (theatre in education) and role-play for children is that it allows them to develop empathy a key element contributing to young people’s mental health and well-being (Eisenberg 1987). Pupils are enabled to consider issues and complex emotional problems beyond their years, but in a safe situation, from behind the protective wall of the frame or role (Heathcote 1984) in which they are sharing the stimulus provided by the actors. Through this interaction – what has been termed ‘scaffolded learning’ (from Vygotsky’s [1986] theories) – they develop creative, imaginative and emotional intelligence that cannot be found through normal modes of education or audience-ship. Learning that takes place in proximity to the actor engages body language, visual and emotional clues that happen simultaneously. During participatory theatre learners are projected into an analysis of multifaceted ideas and enabled to discuss the complexity of human relationships and motivations. A relaxed, playful and non-judgemental dialogue between actor/teacher and learner is opened up. The children are engaged in offering solutions to problems that the character might be experiencing by providing advice for characters. The skill of the actor/teachers is critical too – asking those questions of the children socratically - ‘What do you think I should do?’ ‘How will that help me?’ The answers will be multiple, but the opportunity to try out different strategies in a non-judgemental fictive context by replaying a scene or a moment, offers invaluable group learning opportunities, especially as part of the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) curriculum. Playing out different options as suggested by the children provides valuable learning as they seek a range of creative solutions, expressing empathy, fears and feelings that promote mental well-being (McConachie 2008).

For understandable reasons education under the pandemic has returned us to that oracle-to-individual model in which the empty vessels are filled with the knowledge they need to pass the examinations. Zoom and Teams© replicate this Victorian model of education, replacing the slate with the iPad, despite some functions of these online collaboration tools which offer limited possibilities for pupils to formulate ideas collaboratively. Notions of health education have become side-lined by the perceived necessity to prioritise traditional – and examinable – education. The future will belong to the tech-savvy and to those households with fast broadband and the technology to go with it. The content of the curriculum is reverting to ‘Facts, facts, facts’ as Dicken’s Gradgrind would say. But do we need to overly concern ourselves with this present anomalous situation? Surely, we will ‘get back to normal’ in the end and applied drama/theatre will present its value once again?

**The New Normal?**

We argue that the experience of disrupted and remote learning together with pressures on schools to catch up are contributing further to the mental health crisis. Our concern is that ‘getting back to normal’ is not likely to be the case. Ofsted, the schools inspectorate in England, gives us an indication of this in its ‘Covid 19 November 2020 briefing on schools’. There is scant information about any peripatetic services and no mention of educational theatre inputs at all. At the same time the document reports concern amongst both primary and secondary sectors on the deterioration of language, communication and social skills amongst pupils (Ofsted 2020: 14). For the secondary sector it is assessment that is giving the most cause for concern (Ofsted 2020: 7). It should be a concern for all of us that such a combination of deteriorating social skills and increased pressure to focus on exam and employment success is likely to be detrimental to the mental health of the ‘COVID generation’. Indeed, as Peter O’Connor observes in New Zealand, the gap between what young people need to feel creative and empowered against what is perceived to be the function of education creates an unhealthy tension:

The misguided and now tragically dated notion sitting behind the Ministry of Education’s approach to learning that is centred around individual achievement risks creating classes of people disconnected from a sense that they can be active participants in their own lives (2021: n.pag.).

The ability to work with others to find creative solutions in business - and in our social well-being - will be undermined. The threats to young people’s mental health are multiple: the internet and the technological advance of the workplace presents a future world of employment and opportunities that most adults/teachers cannot imagine, and yet this is the world that children will be expected to navigate successfully. Even before the pandemic mental health charities, researchers and schools were well aware of the lack of services available to young people and how this was contributing to depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide (Weale 2019). A year later, according to a study of 13-19-year-olds published in December 2020 by the Mental Health Foundation (2020: n.pag.) 27 per cent said ‘they had felt “nervous or on edge” on most or nearly all of the days of the previous fortnight’. The study goes on to report that those from ‘less advantaged homes are having the hardest emotional struggle of all’. A more recent study, February 2021, found that young adults (18-24) consistently reported lower coping levels than the rest of the population with 28 per cent stating they had had suicidal thoughts in the previous two weeks.

**Drama and Theatre in Schools**

The pedagogy of theatre and drama which evolved from the progressive education reforms of the 1960s contributed to young people’s personal development, understanding, and emotional intelligence (Wooster 2016). These modes of education have rarely been acknowledged by the curriculum makers who have been largely ignorant of their existence due to their training and the difficulty in actually spectating projects in the classroom. Since the first National Curriculum (introduced by the Education Reform Act 1988) was implemented in the UK in 1990, ‘theatre’ is a subject primarily to be studied, critiqued and performed, and not a pedagogy that gives the tools to understand, challenge and change the world. Although the development of transferable skills such as respecting others, working together as a group and communication skills are key components the emphasis of the curriculum is primarily the appreciation of theatre (HMI 1989: 2-3). The requirement that schools ‘prepare pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life’ (Department for Education 2014: 5) offered opportunities for TIE and applied theatre to mutate into a vehicle for conveying the delicate issues of the Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship agenda which teachers otherwise find so difficult to tackle due to lack of expert training or their familiarity with the cohort. TIE and applied theatre were an important lifeline for these aspects of human activity. One critical issue, then as now, was the assessment of the quality of education that these young people receive through applied theatre; it is not easy to assess emotional intelligence, mental health or mindfulness. Herein lies the danger of the post - (or continuing) COVID-19 crisis; it is tending to drive education back into the world of the 3Rs and the acquisition of facts in preparation for jobs that may not exist in the future. Creative flexibility, cultural understanding, and social solidarity are needed as much as any amount of traditional learning. In contrast to past England and Wales national curricula the proposed (devolved and pre-COVID) Wales’s curriculum offers enormous scope for a heuristic approach to education, offering the following areas of learning and experience:

* Expressive arts
* Health and wellbeing
* Humanities
* Languages, literacy and communication
* Mathematics and numeracy
* Science and technology (TES Editorial 2019: n.pag.)

The order of these areas is in itself significant. The insightful intentions of the Wales curriculum seem to be undermined by the post COVID protocols; we are living through a pandemic when these goals can no longer be delivered with the effectiveness that applied theatre/drama would offer. As Kelly Freebody et.al (2018: 12) state ‘It is the participatory spaces provided in applied theatre work, merging with existing understandings of self in the world that is seen to house so much potential for learning and change’.

**Adapting to Online Delivery**

In March 2020 when the first ‘lockdown’ was imposed in the UK, theatre companies rapidly attempted to adapt their work for online delivery. At the University of Derby, for example, the second-year undergraduate students’ planned tour of David Holman’s *Drink the Mercury* (1976) forced a rapid conversion from a participatory theatre in education programme into a digitalized/online format. Even the rehearsals were conducted on-line. The director, Nathan Powell, worked with students online on character and performance and the students then recorded their performances and submitted footage to be edited. *Drink the Mercury* focused on the poisoning of the fishing waters in Minimarta, Japan in 1930s through to the 1970s. The playwright, late David Holman, produced the project at the Belgrade theatre in 1973 as part of his *Rare Earth* TIE trilogy. The UOD production was aimed at year 6 (age 9-10) pupils inviting them to consider the people of Minimata and the action that they took to challenge the Japanese government. The accompanying workshop activities would have facilitated possible connections with current environmental issues, young activists (such as Greta Thunberg) and collective action. However, the digitalized project became one-directional, streaming into the classroom and relying on the teacher to facilitate the material rather than the trained creators of the programme. The actors never met the learners. Pupils no longer made the journey from their classroom into the school hall where an exciting set, music and performance would be waiting for them. Interaction and participation between the learner and the character should be complex and multi-directional, providing powerful learning opportunities. This was lost.

The question facing those working in applied theatre/drama and TIE is whether the quiddities of their praxis can successfully be adapted to the post COVID world and support emotional health and coherence? In researching this article, we have consulted with a range of professional practitioners including Theatre Centre, Phosphoros Theatre, and The Blahs. Aside from the lack of immediacy (and for many, novelty) for the young people involved in such programmes,,, it was noted that this digital material produced by theatre companies, rather than TV and film producers, is likely to lack sophisticated screen aesthetics. Young people are highly media-savvy in their consumption of screen material where sound and image are fused through slick editing. On the positive side theatre companies can produce tailored and creative responses, integrate creative resources and offer supporting educational materials and activities. The Blah’s projects are now more than ever relying on the close relationships they have with individual teachers to take the work (Pakkar-Hull 2021). Theatre Centre, have had to become TV/film directors in the short term, but the budgets needed to produce a theatre piece will not stretch to cover expensive editing costs and postproduction sound dubbing for long (Parker-Whitehead 2021). For Phosphoros Theatre Company, working exclusively with refugees, the weekly workshops provided a valuable sense of connection, contributing to the mental well-being of participants (something which not all funders found as important as ‘delivering food packages’ and ‘practical’ help) but are difficult to offer remotely (Duffy-Syedi 2021).

It seems clear that some digital approaches to applied theatre work are producing useful lessons for the future. Practice has changed, is changing and will have to change. Over the coming months – possibly years – companies will need to be able to adapt quickly to any future lockdowns but also work sensitively and creatively with schools who are balancing the pressures of catch-up against the mental health needs of young people they are responsible for. Currently the exam system reflects what Paulo Freire (1972: 45–59) called the ‘banking system’ of education – the commodification and industrialism of children’s learning. Anthony Jackson (2005: 106) has long argued for an applied theatre that achieves its ‘interventionist’ aims through aesthetic excellence: ‘It is through the aesthetic indeed that effective theatre will achieve its goals – so long as those goals go beyond the mere imparting of a message, moral or otherwise’. Jackson goes on to argue the importance of ‘dialogic’ theatre by which he means the space to confront and wrestle with ideas within the safe context of the aesthetic vehicle. We maintain that the potential for dialogic analysis is severely hampered by the lack of theatre and drama being invited into schools as a result of the pandemic.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, applied theatre practice and applied drama in the classroom must contribute and enrich learning as education goes through this period of accelerated change. Adopting a cram, cram, cram approach producing more anxiety will contribute to further threats to young people’s mental health. But perhaps applied drama/theatre will find a way back into the classroom to support the COVID generation to creatively seize upon this as an opportunity to develop much needed critical thinking skills through the creative arts? An online Freirian banking system may work very well at installing facts, but human interaction, and the development of empathy is less well served.

As we emerge from, or adapt to, the current crisis, education will need to find ways to repair our social values and rebuild the fabric of human relationships. Theatre itself does this by offering us an opportunity to objectively consider the actions of others presented to us on the stage. It will not be enough just to get children back into the classroom; the palliative use of applied theatre must make again its vibrant contribution, offering young people the chance to engage with ideas and seek creative solutions, often through the PSHE curriculum. And that will be down to all who are working in the field. Support for the work needs to be financial of course, but also requires that ideas and approaches continue to be developed to cope with both the current situation and the situation that will emerge as regulations change and adapt. We need to fight hard for the place of arts in education. The essential nature of our humanity in the post-COVID-19 world will require a fresh exploration that theatre, and especially applied theatre, are uniquely placed to consider. Most of the original exponents of using theatre and drama in education are no longer with us (Augusto Boal, Dorothy Heathcote, and Brian Way); even their immediate acolytes have retired. Whilst the philosophy behind the approaches remains the same younger artists will need to step forward and develop a praxis that responds to the new reality retaining dialogic pedagogy and ‘critical hope’ (Freire 1994: 2) for the role that applied theatre might play. It is probable that the ‘new abnormal’ will be with us for years and many consequences may never be eradicated. The threat of further pandemics in the future will always be present and if applied theatre is to continue to function it needs to continue to develop its practice within its philosophy.

Practitioners, directors and writers are already wrestling with these issues, engaging creatively with ideas that will forge valid work in the field, using theatre arts in educational contexts and thus thwarting the tendency for education to become solely training for economic growth. For all the UK government’s talk of economic recovery and ‘levelling up’ the poorer sections of society to match the better off, in the aftermath of COVID-19 equal importance must be given to social and societal recovery. Applied theatre must rise to the challenge and offer an alternative to the straight-jacketing of education within solely economic constraints. Whatever social distancing may be at times required we can work together to resist emotional distancing becoming the new normal, ‘Replanting creativity in schools might be the most important thing we can do to survive the darkness of today’ (O’Connor, 2021: n.pag.).

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