



# Exploring Identity and Social Justice through Drama in Schools

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The Saskatchewan Association for Multicultural Education found that many educators are aware of the need to consider controversial social issues with their students, but they struggle to find effective ways to deal with them. To support educators in this situation, SAME developed a McDowell project that involved teachers in exploring the use of drama to teach and learn about social justice, multiculturalism and diversity in the classroom. The research addressed the following questions:

- What are the social issues of concern to students?
- How can drama help these issues emerge for discussion and resolution?
- How can teachers develop facilitation skills that will carry across subject areas?
- How can drama help educators engage in a process of critical reflection-in-action?

## Research Methods and Activities

The study was a form of action research with drama as both the medium and subject of inquiry. It involved three interrelated steps:

### 1. Skills Exchange

A series of intensive workshops was held in which an experienced theatre-in-education facilitator worked with eight teachers to develop their drama facilitation skills. Immersed in the workshop process, the teachers built a supportive learning community, identified and explored themes of concern in their educational practice, and learned the techniques, skills and strategies

of transformative drama. Issues surrounding the use of drama in schools were identified. Emerging from the workshops was a set of themes that the teachers wanted to explore in their schools.

### 2. Developing Capacities-in-Action

Between the skill-building workshops, the workshop facilitator worked alongside the teachers as they used drama in their own schools. Teachers led students in dramatic processes and activities adapted to their subject areas (vocational education, cross-cultural education, psychology, ESL and social studies). First they determined areas of concern to students while learning and practising facilitation and improvisational teaching skills. Then the identified social issues were investigated with the students through the production of short interactive plays. An ongoing process was developed for continued expansion of the teachers' drama facilitation skills and the use of drama as a research tool with students.

### 3. Follow-up Activities

The researchers came together in a follow-up workshop to share what they had learned, using both discussion and drama to reflect on experiences and develop strategies for the continued use of dramatic approaches. They developed their own play that looked at teachers' experience of power in the classroom as a means of exploring further the techniques of facilitating transformative drama. The follow-up workshop was an opportunity for participants to use the methods they had

developed to facilitate their own reflection on the research (both content and process).

### **Socially Critical and Transformative Drama**

The drama methodology used in the project was based on the work of David Diamond, who developed a form of drama that makes students aware of how their participation in society has an impact on it. All aspects of society are put within the scope of change by those who participate in it.

Diamond's book, *Power Plays*, contains theatre games and exercises designed to explore common concerns in a process that begins with the participants' own experiences. It assumes that participants can identify the issues in their lives better than anyone else, so the work of the drama facilitator is to provide questions and activities that

help participants to learn from each other. Trust building exercises are used to build a sense of community and safety. The process then focusses on a theme, such as racism, gender, family, peer relationships, violence or harassment. The exercises are, to a large extent, non-verbal, helping participants to make the body expressive and

*Teachers dealing with social issues have to react "in the moment". They are always making choices, often without being sure that they have made the right ones.*

removing talk from its privileged position as the basis for most storytelling. Together participants create a play to be performed for their peers, gradually moving the story from the individual to the general during the process. As the play is performed, members of the audience attempt to provide alternative ways of dealing with the issue being enacted by replacing characters in the play. In this way, new information and perspectives emerge in relationship to the issue and participants learn from each other about the assumptions and the myriad of emotions and conditions attached to the issue.

In this approach, improvised dramatic creation is a research vehicle that embraces and recognizes knowledge emerging in the theatre development process. It also recognizes the respect, pride, sharing and understanding that grow when people work together in a safe environment.

### **Themes from the Data**

Several themes ran through the knowledge that emerged in this project, reflecting both the strengths and the challenges of using theatre techniques in schools. For example, it was suggested that:

- This is a powerful process that lets participants access feelings and issues through movement and image that they would not be able to access through discussion.
- Transformative drama helps to develop community in a group.
- It links subject areas to students' own experiences.
- It helps people see alternative ways to deal with problematic situations.
- It reframes common experiences so that they can be closely examined.
- Engaging students requires patience.
- Far from being a "make and take" learning experience, transformative drama requires that teachers improvise and adapt dramatic processes to the skills, needs and context of the class.
- The process involves risk for teachers and students.

### **Conclusion**

The teachers involved in the project found that they gained an expanded "tool box". They had new approaches and plans on how to use them to link the curriculum to student lives. As well, they had new skills and confidence from their practice in facilitating a non-traditional form of teaching and learning.

### **References**

Diamond, David. (1991). *Power Plays*. Vancouver: Headlines Theatre.