Drama, Masks, and Social Inclusion for Children with a Disability

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Abstract

Internationally, diagnosis of children with neurological disabilities is increasing. While medically such conditions as autism, dyspraxia, and ADHD are defined as neurological, their impacts on the physicality of children in the community cannot be dismissed. There are multiple barriers for social inclusion of children with these disabilities. This chapter argues as to the potential benefits that drama and mask can offer, providing tools to access the wider community as well as the education curriculum. Through drama being a collaborative, not competitive methodology, the fear of rejection and failure can be negated. The role of masks in allowing children to disassociate from an imposed identity allows children full inclusion in a meaningful way. This chapter based on research offers background to specific disabilities, the challenges facing schools and communities, and practical activities with drama and masks to apply.

Keywords

Disability · Drama · Education · Inclusion · Masks

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1   Introduction: Context for Society Inclusion and Disability

In the past seven years, all the States and territories of Australia, whom have responsibility for education, have produced reports from Inquiries on the provision of education for students with a disability (Duncan et al. 2020). The analysis of all the reports reveals that there is a commonality across Australia with the challenges facing children with a disability in their learning. Children with a disability are not receiving an inclusive education but are increasingly marginalized and segregated form their peers despite the 1994 Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1984), which Australia is a signatory, built upon the United Nations Declaration Human Rights (United Nations 1949). The Salamanca Statement was founded on the concepts of a rights-based education, of inclusion. It sought to ensure that all children, not just those with a disability, were offered full education and encouraged all systems to be inclusive. Rather than implementing the Salamanca Statement, Australia appears to be moving backwards in its application of inclusion for children with a disability. Education for children with a disability too often relies on segregated settings. Training, attitudinal approaches, funding, and basic safety of children are all areas of concerns raised by every Inquiry and Report. There are pockets of good practice presented and opportunities for positive change, but significant challenges lie ahead for Australia if it is to meet its obligations. Through a clear understanding of the national, systemic issues arising from these reports, the potential changes that could be implemented nationally to ensure Australia meets its obligations to support all children are presented; but the application of said recommendations by the education systems needs further focus if Australia is to move forward with achieving action on inclusion, rather than political rhetoric (Anderson and Boyle 2019).

In particular there has been a significant growth in the number of children who have a diagnosis of a neurological disability such as autism, dyspraxia, or dyslexia (Licari and Williams 2020). Key to the barriers such children face for inclusion is one of communication and language. This chapter seeks to look at the barriers to successful inclusion these specific children have, specifically in the education, in the context of education as a key aspect of social inclusion in society for many children. This chapter further discusses how the education using the arts, drama, and masks, in particular, can support their progress through wider societies major form engagement with children, the classroom.

2   Children and Disability

Within any classroom, there are a variety of children, each having individual needs and the right to engage fully with education, regardless of culture, ethnicity, physicality, neurology, or gender (Walton and Osman 2018). Most discriminatory acts are usually based upon ignorance, the antithesis of the purpose of early childhood, and primary education (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2009). Never-the-less, schools are a micro-cosm of society and can reflect both the best and worst aspects of the communities

they serve. Methodologies for inclusion for all must be therefore proactively found. More and more nonverbal and disabled children are now home-schooled, as the parents do not believe they are being offered a suitable or equitable learning experience, nor are many fully included in the school systems (Roy 2016).

Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, discrimination on the basis of disability occurs when a person who experiences disability is:

- Treated less favorably than a person who does not experience disability in circumstances that are not materially different (direct discrimination)
- Made to comply with a general requirement or condition which the person is unable to comply with because of their experience with disability and which leads to the person being disadvantaged (indirect discrimination)
- Subjected to the imposition of unreasonable terms or conditions on an activity
- Denied access to a place, activity, or service
- Subject to unjustified termination of an activity
- Asked discriminatory questions or subjected to harassment (Australian Government 1992)

The Act prohibits unlawful discrimination against people who experience disability and promotes an inclusive approach whenever possible, rather than the provision of separate or parallel services. There have been steps to improve the provision of education for children with a disability in the public system particularly since the Salamanca Statement; however, there were some significant issues that need to be addressed.

While a continued call for increased funding and training both for education in general and specifically for children with a disability remains, the funding issue is maybe a slight misdirection. Schools need more funding, of that there is no question. However, there is multiple evidence that suggests that "diverted" funding by schools, education systems, and governments to support children with recognized needs is not actually directed in a method that supports the children's needs or inclusion, but rather is used to removes the child from distracting the other "normal" learners. Funding teacher aides to support students is not the answer (Armstrong 2017). One might consider that the children with the greatest pedagogical needs would be better supported by the staff with the deepest pedagogical training; rather than the all too common practice of the least trained staff being left to support those with the most complex needs (Webster and Blatchford 2015).

It is clear teacher training needs to be re-looked at. A specialist course in "Special Needs" Education just reinforces the concepts of "other" for children with a disability. All children are diverse and should be supported based upon learning need rather than "label" of "special needs" (Rutherford 2016). Multiple reports note that children with a disability are being denied education and inclusion. Schools are not providing them a meaningful learning experience, and they are being separated from their peers without disabilities and labeled as intellectually incapable of learning. They are often being bullied and abused by students and staff or being restrained and "caged." One must therefore take

stock and look for positive solutions to the multiple issues being illuminated, without ignoring the current failings in the system (Florian 2019).

Recommendations have been made that not only teachers be fully trained but also education system leaders and principals. Training helps, but attitudes and labeling are the keys to a seismic shift to treating children with a disability as equal members of in society (Bowes and Grace 2009). One key fact that has been overlooked is that these are not "children with a disability," they are just children. Like all children, they have educational needs. A good teacher and a good school will want to support and develop all children in their tutelage to help them achieve their highest potential. Children must not be viewed as mere labels before they even enter the classroom; yet, it seems, that is what some schools and education systems are doing (Foreman and Arthur-Kelly 2017).

As all reports highlight, teachers do struggle with understanding how to support student behavior. But locking up a child or placing them in a "time-out" room similar to the kind of solitary confinement the most violent criminals receive is not a solution. If children have sensory issues, confining them only exacerbates the condition, along with being an affront to human rights. If children using a wheelchair do not partake in gymnastics as part of their physical education lesson, they do not be disciplined. Therefore, if children with an infantile emotional control, because of their disability, regress into themselves and cannot complete a task – why is it acceptable to chastise or isolate them (Dunst 2002)?

All students need to be offered access to an education that supports their learning, rather than highlighting their deficits. Only then will children with a disability get a fair go. Luck has nothing to do with education for the disabled. Deliberate choice by the community is what will make the difference.

To be sure, there are teachers and schools demonstrating outstanding, inclusive practice, where children with a disability are treated with respect, given a meaningful education and included within the mainstream twenty-first-century classroom, which systems worldwide recognize as the path to the best pedagogical results for all students, with or without a disability (Armstrong et al. 2016). Chris Gilham, of Saint Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Canada argues that:

> Essentially, we value the normal over the abnormal, thus our resources are aimed at normalising. The normalising approach of special education, therefore, is one that conceals the rights of students in and of themselves as human beings not regardless of difference but because of difference. (Gilham 2011, p.114)

There is a therefore need to have ways to create not only academic inclusion but social inclusion within the classroom and beyond.

3 Children and Neurological Conditions Impacting Physical Issues

Rather than considering the challenges specific disabilities have from a medical deficit model, it is preferable to frame the discussion in the barriers that society places for specific children with a disability. In many countries, legislation is clear that buildings and communities have to be accessible for all and in planning terms this has led to focus on supporting access to people with a physical disability (Ashman and Elkins 2012). What must be recognized is that for children with a neurological disability, it can have a physical impact as well as presenting in divergent ways of cognition and communication. Intellectual disability is separate to neurological disability. The two can be concurrent just as there can be comorbidity between many different "labels" of disability. In particular, many children with autism have similarities to dyspraxia, and there can often be elements of ADD/ADHD to further compound the barriers for social inclusion (Kurtz 2008). Autism is defined as "an abnormality of childhood development affecting language and social communication" (Chambers 2014, p. 99). Dyspraxia, however, means "an impaired ability to co-ordinate and perform deliberate actions" (Chambers 2014, p. 481). Although these definitions suggest significant differences, dyspraxia and autism have similar observational diagnostic elements. There is not a blood sample or a genetic marker than can be identified in the lab. Therefore, it is though observation of different reactions that allows a diagnosis to be undertaken (Pauc 2006). The key difference though is in the potential cause of the differences to normal reactions that allows for a diagnosis of autism and dyspraxia is social communication impairment caused by coordination impairment or is the co-ordination impairment a result of social communication impairment. If it is hard to determine subtle differences, some children will be offered either a duo diagnosis, or the diagnosis that both matches the "observation" and also will allow the greatest support to be offered. This is key as financial support is often attached to specific diagnosis (Westwood 2015).

Both dyspraxia and autism are observed through children (and adults) who have balance challenges, are slower than their peers to walk, have social interaction deficits, have speech communication challenges, and have the appearance of processing thought differences. In talking about these difficulties, the word deficit is used in many. It must be noted that the term deficit is a medical model-based descriptor. These are deficits in terms of fitting into the society and in comparison, to others who do not have these diagnoses. While autism and dyspraxia (and other disabilities) may mean there are barriers for individuals in general society, the same "deficits" can also produce strengths (Portwood 1999).

For dyspraxia in particular, there are three key types: oral dyspraxia, speech dyspraxia, and motor dyspraxia. Individuals can have any combination of these there forms of dyspraxia and to varying degrees of intensity. In all three, it appears that there is a miscommunication between the sensory transmission within the brain, where what the body's senses are communicating is happening and the signals the brain then send back to different parts of the body may not fully match (Talukdar 2012).

An example may be of a ball being thrown. The body sends signals to the brain, through multiple senses, of where the ball is in space. In return, the brain then sends signals to the body of where different parts of the body should be to catch the ball. If those signals are disrupted or mistimed, the person with dyspraxia will miss catching the ball (either too early or too late) and the ball will drop. Hence, the child with dyspraxia is often thought of as the clumsy child. With oral dyspraxia, mouth movements are an Augean task meaning the child might not be able to consciously stick out their tongue, or chew with a closed mouth. For verbal dyspraxia, the actual formation of words and sounds becomes the challenge leading to speech and communication limitations. Motor dyspraxia affects overall body movements so writing can be affected, or playing with peers, or even driving skills and tying shoelaces. Many children with autism also have elements of dyspraxia to them as well (Brooks 2007).

These challenges can lead to social isolation as the "delays" become apparent, their peers notice and may feel less inclined to include the "different" child. This in turn can lead to emotional withdrawal and compounded anxiety. Key to all of these issues though is that dyspraxia and autism do not mean intellectual disability, but the needs in society to use motor movements and communication skills in learning mean that some children can fall behind in their learning due the struggle to maintain equanimity with their peers while also trying to support their challenges. If writing is tiring and difficult because of motor dyspraxia, by the time a new task or learning experience has begun for others, the child with dyspraxia may just be halfway through the first task due to their motor difficulties. They will exponentially "fall" behind, further alienating them form their peers (Kranowitz 2005).

For many with dyspraxia, observation and practice becomes key. By developing the ability to be quiet and somewhat withdrawn, they can "mask" their symptoms, but this can also lead to them being highly empathetic and developing a deep understanding of others (Eckersley 2004). This is when the arts and, in particular, drama become important for learning, inclusion, and success.

4   Arts and Inclusive Learning

There needs to be an understanding of what is defined by effective or rich learning in the arts classroom, and in particular in the drama classroom. Of key relevance to this study are three papers: Research Findings and Recommendations on Educational Theatre and Drama (Cziboly 2010); Drama Education and Development of Self: Myth or Reality? (Wright 2006); and The Role of Arts Participation in Student's Academic and Nonacademic Outcomes: A Longitudinal Study, Home, and Community Factors (Martin et al. 2013). There is the suggestion that arts may positively impact upon children. However, questions as to the causality between formal arts education and academic achievement in educational settings still need to be addressed (Moga et al. 2000). Given these uncertainties, it is reasonable to speculate that isolating one variable element within drama such as masks, and using

a constructivist perspective, might support wider empirical study into if and how drama impacts upon student development.

Constructivism theory is based upon the concepts of Piaget (Wadsworth 2003). Piaget's concepts of assimilation and accommodation form the basis of constructivism, that is, students construct knowledge from experiences they have in learning. This also builds upon Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," wherein learners are challenged in their current level of development through activities and learning that offer a level of stretching (Vygotsky 1986). In the drama learning process, and the associated pedagogies, constructivism works through the embodied learning process (Davis et al. 2015). This does not diminish the role that instructional learning can play within drama, but many drama activities, even within this method, require students to apply them in a practical rather than abstract method. Drama learning innately encourages "collaborative learning," through the interactions between performers and individuals involved in production skills (Lee et al. 2015).

It must be emphasized that constructivism theory is not a teaching practice, but a theory. The majority of critical studies on constructivism theory have been applied within Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) rather than the Creative and Performing Arts (CAPA). Bjørn Rasmussen's analysis of constructivist aesthetics in drama education suggests that it can be impactful in the embodied learning of the drama classroom that is required for formal assessment (Rasmussen 2010).

> Instead of discovering or imitating truth or pre-given knowledge, the mind and the self-emerge through locally situated and behavioural processes. The constructivist artist or teacher believes that the self, meaning and knowledge is developed under the influence of all present and 'interacting' language, materials, environment, bodily acts, cognition and affective representations (Rasmussen 2010, p. 533).

As the arts are fundamentally vehicles for personal and shared expression and communication, learner agency is critical if genuine artistic learning and identity support is to be achieved. Ewing (2010, p. 41) highlights the power of drama as a means of increasing student agency by "authentically sharing power and risk-taking," between teachers and children. This is not to say that other curriculum areas do not also offer student agency. Multiple learning areas that involve physical activity, such as design and technology or physical education (Callcott et al. 2012), can lay claim to this. However, all of the arts have the potential to increase learner agency, because they enable children to engage through authentic processes *as* artists, *as* makers and *as* responders. The National Education and the Arts Statement (MCEETYA 2008, pp. 4–5) states that:

> Arts and culture can enrich our lives by building mutual respect and understanding. An arts-rich education can help young people make sense of the world and enhance their awareness of diverse cultures and traditions and the wider global context in which they live.

5   Drama and Masks

Drama as an expressive force can be formidable. It allows children to address taboo topics or ideas of emotional depth and such issues as discrimination, bullying, and exclusion. Through the use of cultural forms of arts expression and stimuli, differing cultural knowledge can be valued and shared equal to that which is the dominant culture of the classroom (Morgan and Saxton 1987). It can be as simple as students planning the number of roles to equally include all. Through the organization of the staging of each scene, students need to consider angles and sight line, height, and depth. In studying drama, students learn to reflect critically on their own experiences and responses and further their own aesthetic knowledge and preferences (Anderson 2012). They learn with growing sophistication to express and communicate experiences through and about drama.

Making in drama involves improvising, devising, playing, acting, directing, comparing and contrasting, refining, interpreting, scripting, practicing, rehearsing, presenting, and performing. Students use movement and voice along with language and ideas to explore roles, characters, relationships, and situations. They learn to shape and structure drama, including the use of contrast, juxtaposition, dramatic symbol, cause and effect, and linear and episodic plot forms (Schneider et al. 2006).

Responding in drama involves students being audience members and listening to, enjoying, reflecting upon, analyzing, appreciating, and evaluating their own and others' drama works (Heathcote and Bolton 1994).

Both making and responding involve developing practical and critical understandings of how the elements of drama can be used to shape and structure drama that engages audiences and communicates meaning. Learning in drama is based on two fundamental building blocks: the elements of drama and the ways that narrative shapes and structures dramatic action. The elements of drama work dynamically together to create and focus dramatic action and dramatic meaning. Dramatic action is shaped by dramatic tension, space and time, and mood and atmosphere to symbolically present and share human experiences for audiences (Somers 1994).

As previously noted, observation is a core tool of any performer. To be able to represent others and situations, there must be an understanding and awareness of that which goes on around. The same applies for artists and dancers. It may seem strange that individuals with sensory processing challenges should be drawn and thrive in a knowledge-based area which is heavily sensory based, but it is this fact that allows people with dyspraxia to enhance their own skills (Kirby and Drew 2003).

The arts require reflection and continual rehearsing and amending to whatever creative work may be happening without a competitive element. In sports, the person with dyspraxia may easily feel a failure a no one wants the individual who cannot kick a ball on the football team; however, with the arts there is time to practice, make mistakes and continually mold work, and experiment and make mistakes. Motor movement can be practiced time and time again, as can speech and expressions until there is muscle memory and high technical skill. In addition, the arts are form of communication that allows the inner self to express

itself and be recognized as the individual, it is an alternative semiotic device where "judgment" is in the interpretation (Pink 2006; Roy and Dock 2014).

Research in masks in the classroom found an unexpected benefit for children with neurological disabilities. Masks are of course synonymous with drama and theatre. Yet to understand fully the role that masks play in drama education and the perspectives upon which this study has been built, there needs to have an understanding of the research framework's foundations. Masks have played various roles in society from earliest times to the present. These have included community rituals, performances, and aesthetics. The use of masks has had an impact upon the understanding of how society views itself, on our understanding of the idea of self throughout history (Foreman 2000).

In context, the background for masks is based on four primary areas: anthropology, psychology, theatre, and education, and the research framework for this study stems from these. Anthropology in connection with masks is the representation and usage of masks, historically in societal groupings as well as in ritual. The role of psychology and masks is concerned with the relationship and understanding of identity and self. Theatre has used masks as performance separate to ritual dating back 3,000 years. The role of arts and drama education forms the specific context for the research (Roy and Ladwig 2015).

Drama and mask work allow students to confront identity formation and, through their application in formal education, such explorations will allow for a firm basis in adulthood. Without such opportunities, role confusion can threaten. It is through such engagement in drama and theatre activities that a firm establishment of identity in society is allowed. The recent 2010 European study, Drama Improves Lisbon Key Competencies in Education "DICE" (Eriksson et al. 2014), demonstrates that drama education increases the quality of education for all students.

DICE was a two-year research study that involved 12 countries, 111 different drama programs, and 4445 students, and the measurable impact drama had upon their educational attainment. Examining five of the eight Lisbon Key Competencies, it found that students in schools that engage with drama in the curriculum are more likely to be successful citizens than those who are not. Students who study drama have an increased employment rate, stay in school longer, have a higher quality level of education and training, make clearer links between culture and education, are more active citizens, are more sympathetic to cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, and are more innovative, creative, and competitive citizens. According to Eisner (1998, p. 59),

> The arts inform as well as stimulate; they challenge as well as satisfy. Their location is not limited to galleries, concert hall, and theatres. Their home can be found whenever humans choose to have attentive and vital intercourse with life itself. This is, perhaps, the largest lesson that the arts in education can teach, the lesson that life itself can be led as a work of art. In so doing, the maker himself is remade. This remaking, this re-creation is at the heart of the process of education.

Fig. 1 Mask education
intersection
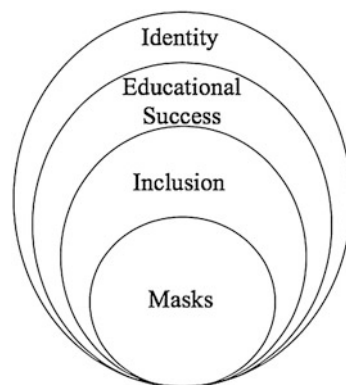
What was interesting to note with the mask research was that when children were
wearing masks, they were able to disassociate from their own identity, to become the
other. More so, their interactions with each were to the masked character rather than
the individual performer, in that the preconceptions of each actor disappeared and
any movements "quirks" were associated with the character that the mask was rather
than the performer who was wearing the mask. The children with disabilities being
observed could no longer be identified. The children with disabilities themselves
were able to identify this sudden equalizing in the inclusion process. They felt one
and the same as their peers. Their peers felt one and the same with them, and all the
individuals involved were also able to self-reflect on the realization that they did not
always treat each other this way when they were not wearing masks. All the
participants became self-aware and developed insightful empathy for each other.
There was true social inclusion (Roy 2020).

Figure 1 represents the intersection that masks have the potential to play in the
competing purposes of education (Saavedra and Opfer 2012). Further longitudinal
research into ongoing effect of self-awareness though mask usage can carry on
beyond the classroom will be important. There is research being undertaken in
Australia to investigate whether other dissociative found objects in the classroom
can also support self-esteem and identity with children, including those with a
disability.

Of the three objects selected in Fig. 2, puppets are the closest in relation to masks,
in that they are a form of separate disguise, a mask of the hand (Bell 1997). Analysis
of the data on puppet usage by Leanne Guihot (2020) suggests this may be the case.

> The most concise definition of "performative objects" is by Frank Proschan. In 1983 he
> described them as "material images of humans or spirits that are created, displayed, or
> manipulated in narrative or dramatic performance. Performing object is a descriptive term
> for all material images used in performance, and puppets and masks are at the centre of
> performing object theatre around the world. (Bell 1997, p. 30)
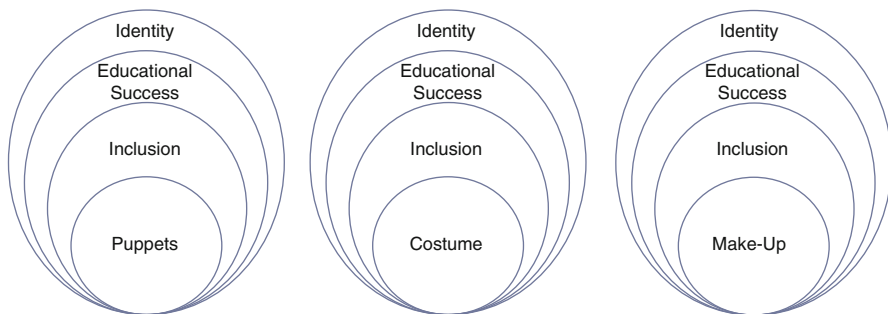
Fig. 2 Performative object intersections

6   Conclusion and Future Directions

It is clear from the growing literature on both drama and the wider creative arts of visual art, dance, and music, that they have both an intrinsic and extrinsic value. They offer improved academic outcomes for children, but more importantly they allow for opportunities of greater social inclusion and well-being. Indeed, there is some suggestion that they can enable individuals to thrive and develop leadership potentials.

Masks, in particular, offer a method for individuals to explore their physical skills and their sense of identity which is crucial for young people. It is within the role of engagement in the arts and in the both the creation of masks and their application (use) that there is exciting potential. Inclusion in its truest form can take place. The markers of difference that too often lead to exclusion of groups are removed. The mask truly does disguise "identity" allowing anonymity and acceptance. For children with an "invisible" neurological disability, this is particularly heightened. There is no obvious physical disability and so it is when they move and interact that their "difference" is noted. Through the mask creating a new individuals, an other, their reactions are more readily accepted and they have the time to become self-aware and also "rehearse" movements allowing them the option to adapt to others if they so desire or to be accepted for who they are.

What has been discussed in this chapter has implications for teachers, students, educational leaders, and policy-makers in Australia and internationally. While the study on which this chapter is based may appear to be highly specialized, the topic has far-reaching implications. The use of masks offers a core element of understanding of others and self. Student emotional well-being and the development of self are crucial to educational success (Kaplan and Maehr 1999). The evidence suggests that the use of masks supports all types of students in classrooms in terms of inclusion, including those with identified additional learning needs such as autism or dyspraxia, and this has implications for educators everywhere.

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