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TIME FOR DRAMA?

The development of drama as a subject in the Icelandic school system. Past, present and future.

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Drama as a subject in Iceland

1976: Drama was introduced into the national curriculum in compulsory education of Iceland.

1999: Drama in education established in the curriculum and drama defined as a subject to bring other subjects together in performances.

2013: Drama defined as a subject like other art subjects in the national curriculum.

A short historical overview.

In Iceland drama, was first introduced into the national curriculum of compulsory education in 1976. At that time teachers were encouraged to use the methods of drama in Icelandic and social studies. In the curriculum from 1999, drama was further established and given the status of 'drama in education', a method that could be used when teaching other subjects. Furthermore, it was defined as a subject that could bring together the school community in performances.

Even though this change did not mean increased financial support directly for drama activities in the school system, it enhanced awareness of the subject and the effect it could have on upbringing and learning. As a direct consequence, interest in drama in the school system greatly increased. Not only were schools using drama in education, but some schools also took up drama as a subject among other art subjects.

Even though this achievement should have meant a secure status for drama in education it did in fact not secure its place. Kristín Ólafsdóttir (2007) reviewed this in her mas-

ter's thesis *The Development of Using Drama in Icelandic Compulsory Education*. The aim of her study was to clarify the course of the underlying ideology for drama in the school system, the methods used, as well as its principal aims. An important part of the study was to find out what enabled its development and what may have hindered it. The findings stated that even though drama in education (i. leikræn tjáning) had found its way into the curriculum, this did not secure its use in schools. Ólafsdóttir concluded that implementing new methods of teaching demands a variety of actions, with teachers' education, co-operation and the support of the principals being the vital factors (Ólafsdóttir, 2007).

Teachers in the field became interested in developing the subject of drama further and created FLÍSS, The Icelandic Drama and Theater in Education Association in 2005. One of its aims from the beginning was to establish drama as a subject in the curriculum. At the same time awareness increased in the teachers' education about the importance of drama in education and ways of using it. At the University of Iceland, School of Education, a specialization in the field of drama in educa-



OUTDOORS: 50 students in 6th grade performing the play *Ronia the Robber's daughter* in the forest (a green area close to the school) in Reykjavik (photo: Rannveig Björk Þorkelsdóttir)

tion was established. At the Iceland Academy of the Arts, specialization in the field of drama teaching was made possible for professionals with a background performance.

In the preparation of a new curriculum, meant to be published in 2011, teachers in the field of drama emphasized their view: that drama would not gain a secure place in the school system unless it was given the status of a subject in its own right. To secure this view, the editor of the arts and crafts subject guide in the National curriculum came from the Iceland Academy of the Arts, where the emphasis from the beginning of its establishment was on drama as an art form. Also, responsibility for the drama section was distributed among a number of drama teachers with acting and theatre background, and among other groups throughout the educational structure. This paved the way for the subject of drama to become a part of the next curriculum.

Present situation of the subject of drama

In the new national curriculum presented in

2013, drama was defined as a subject in its own right for the very first time. The objective of the new subject was to train students in the methods of the art, but also to provide drama as a teaching method, founded in the art form (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). Drama was allotted time on the timetable alongside the other arts and craft subjects. In this new timetable the arts and the crafts should be taught 900 minutes per week in grades 1- 4, 840 minutes per week in grades 5-7 and 340 minutes per week in grades 8-10 divided equally between the arts and the crafts (The Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 50).

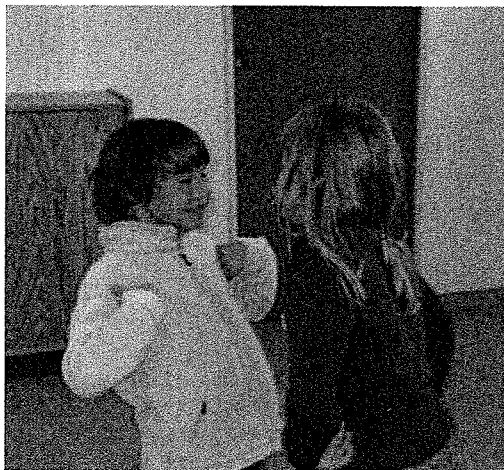
This leaves the arts with an average of 7.8 % (1040 minutes), again divided into three categories: performing arts (dance and drama), visual arts and music. Each of these categories should make up 2,6% of weekly classed in all grades, with drama being only on part in this equation. (see Table 1).

Timetable for arts and crafts in Icelandic national curriculum, (2014):

ARTS	CRAFTS
<i>Performing Arts Dance / Drama</i>	<i>Home Economics</i>
<i>Visual Art</i>	<i>Design & Craft</i>
<i>Music</i>	<i>Textiles</i>

However, no decision is made as to how much time is allotted for each subject each week. Schools organize their teaching within the framework, and it is entirely in the hands of school principals to choose if the subjects are to be taught separately or integrated with other subjects (Þorkelsdóttir, 2016); in separate short-term courses that are allocated more hours in the timetable for a certain period of time; or continuously throughout the school year (Österlind et.al., 2016).

This change was a big step and has since greatly increased the opportunities of drama in the school system. Now drama is on the same level as the other arts and crafts subjects, and drama teachers have a greater pos-



INDOORS/OUTDOORS: Various drama activities in primary schools in Reykjavík, Iceland (photo: Rannveig Björk Þorkelsdóttir)

sibility to work full time in their field. A new and positive situation has surfaced, but still there are some major issues of concern: even though drama did find its way into the curriculum it does not mean it is being taught. In a recent survey done by FLISS among its members, only 15 teachers out of 34 answering the survey were teaching drama in compulsory schools over the school year 2014-2015. According to FLISS that number has diminished over the past two years (Jónsdóttir, 2017). These numbers have led to speculation on what might be the underlying factors of the slow implementation of the subject into the school system.

Enabling and constraining aspects of drama

In her Ph.D. study, Rannveig Björk Þorkelsdóttir (2016) looked at how drama as a subject is implemented in Icelandic compulsory education. The study was carried out in two compulsory schools in Reykjavík by observing two drama teachers in their work over

one school year, from 2013-2014. It shows both enabling and constraining aspects of drama teaching practices. For example, what can be considered a constraining aspect is the lack of *qualified drama teachers*. Obviously it is of great importance to have teachers of drama, but there are not enough teachers with the right qualifications to teach the subject (Þorkelsdóttir, 2016).

Another constraining factor that can be considered is *large student groups*. Since drama is a whole class activity, the principals of the schools can prioritize the subject in their schools. This fact (i.e. teaching drama as a whole class activity) however often leaves the drama teacher with variably sized groups and may result in several groups being combined together, for example, in a performance. This can leave the drama teacher teaching up to 50 students at a time (Þorkelsdóttir, 2016).

Believing in the importance of the subject is yet another factor enabling the drama teaching practice. It is important for all subjects that the teachers consider their subject to be of importance, but as drama in general does not have a strong standing in the school community, it is worth noting that the drama teachers in Þorkelsdóttir's study consider their passion for the subject to be a driving force in their teaching. They find they still need „something more“, and that seems to be connected to their artistry (Þorkelsdóttir, 2016).

Both teachers in the study talk about the need for communication with other teachers, and the lack of such communication gives them a feeling of isolation. If a drama teacher does not have a fruitful relationship and dialogue with other teachers, for example in the arts, it can mean that teaching drama can become a lonesome practice. Therefore, the study calls for changes in opportunities

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for professional development regarding the drama teacher, and for a reconceptualization of how a drama teacher's learning trajectory could be designed in order to support, both novice teachers and more experienced ones (Thorkelsdóttir, 2016).

Future ideas

For the future of the subject of drama we not only believe that it's important to focus on the teachers' education, but also, on further implementation of the subject itself in schools. In other countries, where drama and theatre have become part of the curriculum, the subject has often struggled to maintain its existing place, and in some cases lost ground. For example, in the United Kingdom where drama once was a powerhouse, there seems to have been a concerted political effort to systematically remove it from classrooms (Anderson & Dunn, 2013, p. 6). In Thorkelsdóttir's (2016) study of two drama teachers in primary education, she found out that both teachers were hired by their principals to teach drama due to knowledge of the subject, both teachers were specialists with a foundation in the arts. What is interesting is that both the teachers seemed to have a need for artistic work in drama and theatre outside of schoolwork. In fact, they both came into the school with a double competence, as teaching actors, but they did not seem to develop the artistic side of themselves enough in school, and both left their teaching position (Thorkelsdóttir, 2016). It is therefore important to be on the alert, so that what we have gained is not lost due to difficult work conditions and lack of believes on behalf of administrators. The education of drama teachers is a vital factor in this case.

Even though drama has an established position in the national curriculum in Iceland, it still represents a challenge for the educational system. One of the fundamentals of making the curriculum work in practice is teachers' competence. In schools that

already have drama on their timetable, we have to ask ourselves what needs to be changed in order to make drama teachers qualified for the challenge of implementing a new subject, and what makes them want to stay in their jobs. The answer could lie in the education of teachers and the training of qualified drama teachers.

Our view is that we need to make the profession of drama teaching appealing both to drama teachers already working in the field of education and to novice teachers. Collaboration between institutions in the field of teachers' education (e.g. Univeristy of Iceland, School of Education) and others in the field of art (e.g. Arts Academy of Iceland and Icelandic Film School) could make a difference. On one hand it could bring students closer to the professional skills needed to teach the subject of drama. And on the other hand, those already with professional training in performance would gain a better understanding of the teaching profession. This could lead to a more coherent understanding of the art of drama and performance, and provide the skills needed to use its methods in all education. Necessary professional practice would be implemented in schools that have drama on their timetable, which in turn would inspire all drama activities within the schools.

Not only do we believe that these ideas would strengthen the professional skills of drama teachers. It would also contribute to making drama an integral part of every teachers' repertoire. In fact, our view is that every student teacher should become familiar with the practice of drama in the school environment, know what it is about, what is needed to practice it, and where he/she can reach for assistance, collaboration and support within the school environment.

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