

# The Routledge Companion to Drama in Education



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# DREAM STAGE – LET OUR DREAMS COME TRUE THROUGH THE ARTS

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## **Introduction**

The need for a transformation of education in the face of an unknown future with many challenges on different societal levels has triggered a research project focusing on intervention, creativity and communication and on embodied, relational and artistic approaches to teaching and learning. In an increasingly globalised, competitive world that is undergoing a process of enormous technological change, the arts and the culture they represent are often neglected by the formal education system. In Iceland, as in other countries, many young people spend much of their time on the Internet and social media, a highly fictionalised environment. In this digital arena young people can also be informed about threats and opportunities in the future. The educational aspects and the meaning-making processes of constructing fictive identities and fictive worlds form the background of the research project Dream Stage. Focusing on developing a culture of intervention, communication, development, empowerment and expression, young people are given the opportunity to create their hopes and dreams. Set in a community centre for young people at a compulsory school in Iceland, the project is intended for the benefit of the young people themselves, but it is no less beneficial for the community and society as a whole. The education policy of Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland, lays the foundations for progressive work in schools and leisure centres, anchored in the strengths of Icelandic society. At the same time, the policy seeks to meet the challenges of the external world by looking into constructive responses to the perils faced by many young people in the midst of rapid societal and technological changes that transform children's educational upbringing as well as traditional ideas about learning. The mission is that every child should be an active participant in their education. The policy is based on the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children's education should aim to develop their character, skills and physical and mental abilities, for the purpose of preparing children to lead responsible lives in a free society in the spirit of understanding, peace, mutual respect, human rights and friendship. The Dream Stage project allows young people to create and perform their own dreams and hopes through theatre. The aim of the project is to boost their creativity, audacity and talent by strengthening their social skills and solidarity and promoting positive communication among young people in compulsory school through artistic creation. Thus, it is acknowledged that the arts



have the potential to play a special and unique role in implementing the ideals of a quality education. The research question we explore is: *What are the effects of creativity and artistic work on the self-image of teenagers working in art?* By producing creative work, the teens compose or choose the content to be set up in the field. The project wants to emphasise working with the youths' self-image, involving the group as a whole and encouraging individual and collective responsibility as well as respect and sympathy. Another aim is to strengthen the school culture and empower teens to explore different cultures and look for what connects us all. To a large extent, the policy echoes the national curriculum and Reykjavík's current policies concerning schools and leisure and youth work.

### **The Icelandic national curriculum guide**

The education policy that appears in the *Icelandic National Curriculum Guide* rests on six fundamental pillars on which the curriculum guidelines are based. These pillars are intended as guidelines for general education and the working methods of compulsory school. They are *literacy in the widest sense, education towards sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity*. The fundamental pillars appear in the content of subjects and subject areas, the students' competencies, study assessments, school curriculum guides and internal school evaluations. All the fundamental pillars are based on critical thinking, reflection, scientific attitudes and democratic values. According to the Icelandic curriculum, education in drama includes training students in the methods of the art form, and the dramatic literacy in the widest sense, enriching the students' understanding of themselves, human nature and society. When students take part in drama it gives them the opportunity to put themselves in the shoes of others in an imagined context, which can encourage the students to talk and communicate from a different point of view in the safety of the classroom.

Drama is useful to enrich and enhance learning in subjects such as mother tongue, sociology, history and foreign languages, and play a leading role in the integration of subjects and subject areas.

*(The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013)*

The competence criteria for drama include training students in the methods of the art, but they also provide aims for drama as a teaching method, where the method for the teaching is founded on the art form. The competence criteria for drama for grades 1–10 build on one another. The competence criteria for drama grade 4 are process-based, a mixture of content and aims, stating that the lesson needs to include “teacher in role, living through drama, self-expression, growing through drama, work in pairs, and learning through drama” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013, pp. 150–151). In the competence criteria for drama grades 7 and 10, lessons in drama are theatre-based, and drama aims towards theatre products. The lessons need to include “improvisation, the student's ability to take on a role, work with text, work in a group, work with many forms of theatre, take on a differed acting style and be able to see the connection between the performer and the audience” (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013).

### **What can art contribute?**

Advocates for the importance of arts education consider it a unique field of knowledge with its own theoretical constructions. They see the arts as being a universal human language (Schonmann, 2016, p. 22). Shifra Schonmann poses the question: How does arts education



educate? She discusses the notion of placing drama/the arts at the centre of the curriculum. She turns the thinking in another direction: “If arts are at the centre of our lives, we do not have to claim them to be at the centre of the curriculum, because they are already there” (p. 27). Following Schonmann’s logic, it is “/.../ by no means certain that all advocacies for arts in education benefit students and their learning in the end” (p. 15). Schonmann’s point is that the arts can provide a growing entertainment economy with content, but this economy is not always devoted to educating the younger generations. Gert Biesta (2018), on the other hand, asks, what can arts contribute? Is it to let young people relate to what it means to express themselves, their desires and dreams? He believes that art is not just exploration of what it means to be in dialogue with ‘the world’ or in dialogue with ‘the other’. Biesta describes the power of art in educational work as follows:

Art makes our desires visible, gives them form, and by trying to come into dialogue with what or who offers resistance, we are at the very same time engaged in the exploration of the desirability of our desires and in their rearrangement and transformation.  
*(Biesta, 2018, p. 18)*

Drama and the arts are important in this chaotic world, and perhaps more so today than ever because of the challenges young people are facing in modern society. Through drama the students can learn to interact with one another in a safe space and try out different social roles, and through role-playing they have the opportunity to explore aspects of what it means to be human (Thorkelsdóttir, 2018). The arts, at their best, as Peter Abbs (2003) claims, deepen and refine our sense of what it means to be alive. The arts matter:

/.../ because they serve – at their best – the deep human impulse to understand, to integrate and to transcend; they serve life’s ineradicable desire to live more fully, more abundantly. I have always felt that art and, especially, the making of art enables individuals to ratchet up their ephemeral lives to the level of high symbolic adventure and philosophical questing.  
*(p. 67)*

Jonathan Neelands (1996) described modes of empowerment in drama on four different levels, from personal, cultural and communal to social/political. By engaging with theatre, one’s sense of ‘self’ is transformed, learning about genres, histories and the range of “choices” of form. Theatre has the means of making the invisible influences of culture visible and discussable; theatre is personal empowerment as part of the social and aesthetic expression of a community’s hopes, fears and dreams. And theatre may be interpreted as a rehearsal for change and as an arena for radical dialogue. This is an acknowledgement of the role of drama and theatre education in increasingly multicultural and diverse settings. Thus, the arts make a strong claim to be a part of education. Through the arts the students can construct new aesthetic knowledge and deepen their human impulses and experience.

### **Study design and data collection**

The research is based on a qualitative research tradition where the aim was to look at and understand the perspectives of those who are being investigated. We have chosen an ethnographic approach for the study, in the form of ethnography in education. This is because we explicitly wanted to study the culture and the context of drama activity as an arts education



practice. The study can be more precisely considered as a micro-ethnographic study of the culture of arts education, as its focus is limited to the Dream Stage project. Data were collected over one school year, from fall 2019 to spring 2020, in one youth centre. The participants in the study were 15 students in 8th to 10th class (13–16 years old) and their teachers. A total of ten interviews were conducted, eight with students and two with the teacher. We have chosen methods commonly used in ethnographic studies for data collection. The main method was observation, and classroom monitoring was supported by video observations and photographs of certain situations. A micro-ethnographic approach focuses on language or discourse-in-use (the drama discourse), as Douglas Baker, Judith Green and Audra Sku-kauskaite (2008, p. 79) maintain. They point out that video recordings enable the researcher to document segments of life in classrooms, “/.../ where the members discursively construct events, identities, and academic content, among other social accomplishments”.

We analysed the material during the data generation in the field. After each visit we wrote extended field notes about our observations. The main method by which we have analysed the material is interpretative. We searched for meaning and understanding and moved between the various parts and the whole in order to develop an understanding of the experiences of the participants in the community centre. We began by using keyword analysis and searched for a word that had some kind of meaning in the larger context: for example, *drama methods* and *learning in the art*. The idea is that in order to understand what the participants say it is important to look at words they use to communicate (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The analysis can be carried out within different domains of a culture or social reality, and work can be done at various levels. Wolcott (1994) maintains that analysis is a kind of sorting. We teased out different themes in relation to the research question and organised overarching themes. The themes we settled on are *social skills*, *self-confidence* and *literacy skills*. We formulated these patterns and themes and connected them into a coherent narrative. In such interpretive work reflexivity is a primary tool for the researcher in finding ways to represent data in the product: the ethnographic account (Pole & Morrison, 2003).

### **Ethical considerations**

Since this research project was conducted in compulsory schools, the City of Reykjavík in Iceland was made aware of the research project, and also the principals of the schools that participated. At the beginning of the school year 2019–2020 a meeting was held in the school with the students to introduce the research project. A letter of informed consent was sent out to all the students and their parents, and all were signed and handed back to us before the fieldwork began. All the students agreed to participate in the research project.

### **Dream Stage Setup**

In the elective course, students were given time and space to compose and set up the work. The openings and premises of the community centre, called 100&1, were used for field trips and rehearsals for the project. The community centre has also been involved in mobilising young people to participate in different aspects of the project, for example by encouraging students with an interest in photography to take pictures for a play, those who are interested in clothing and fashion to take part in costume design and so on. The project was divided into three parts: the *dream*, the *creation* and the *accomplishment*. The parts were each set up as workshops where the participants were divided into work teams, with the students coming together at the end of each workshop for a discussion (Figure 36.1).



# THE DREAM

## September – October

### WARM-UP GAMES

The first lesson began with some warm-up and concentration games. The students were given basic methods for criticizing and analysing works of art. Together as a group, they will use these methods to identify tasks the teacher will submit. At the beginning of the process, it is extremely helpful to help the group develop a protocol.

### CODE OF CONDUCT

The teacher instructs the group to make 10 rules for themselves which they need to follow through the whole process so that group can work well together.

### SURVEY

In early September the group takes an anonymous and untraceable survey focusing on students' social skills, communication and culture.

### GAMES

Games like *Zip Zap Boing* – to build concentration and team building

*Tell Me the Truth*

*Zombie Name Game*

Working Through Improvisation

Examples of party quirks and “*who, what, where?*”

Reflective criticism – how do we criticise the work of other students?

Human rights and privileges

The community – how do students talk specifically about someone's social group? Do they care about the privileges of immigrants? What about the human rights of children?

Students present works that they feel are important here and now.

Figure 36.1 Sample lesson plan – “Dream”



## The dream

In the first part of the project, certain exercises were used to strengthen the group. They started with team building, improvisation, warm-up and concentration games and thus created a sense of security in the group. The group discussed the origins and identity of each individual as part of a discussion about multiculturalism. The students asked themselves questions such as: What is it that makes us who we are? What connects us? How are we different? How are we similar? Then the students learned critiquing techniques. The workshops included exercises/tasks and a lecture followed by a discussion and reflection. Practical tasks were developed built on the students' ideas, and the students developed creative projects based on their own contributions. The group examined various works of art, both those the supervisor presented to them and those they had chosen for themselves to present to the group. The works were in the form of photography, photos of installations, music videos and much more. As part of the Dream Stage the group went to the City theatre together to see a play called *Shakespeare in Love*.

They also went to see the *Chromo Sapiens* exhibition by Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir at Reykjavík Art Museum. After the show and the exhibition, the students critically assessed their experience (Figure 36.2).

## Creation

Step two is the creation part of the Dream Stage. During the project, a variety of formative and summative evaluation methods were used which stimulated lively discussion and unique meetings between students and teachers. After the students began to master the methods of critique, they began to create their own. The supervisor gave them the materials and rules on which to build their own micro-works. After each micro-task, the group sat down to evaluate the work, applying what they had learned when they analysed the work in the first part of the project. What did the creator mean by the work? Did it work? What could be done better and what was done well? During this time, they looked at their community and each chose a topic they felt was important to discuss in their exhibition. They looked to the news, their school community and the surrounding area to find out what issues they felt were most urgent to address. They asked themselves questions such as: Did they want to do a feminist work? Or discuss the status of refugees? Did they want to talk about love, or fear? The group then came together in a studio at the end of this part and decided on an overall concept to work with during the next stage of the process.

They wrote monologues and some created still images or tableaux vivants and chose an overall idea to work on (Figure 36.3). They wanted to work on dissecting prejudice and asked such questions as: Where do prejudices come from? How can we oppose them? To do this, they used the prejudices that teenagers face and aimed to stage stereotypical teenagers to break down these stereotypes and demonstrate that reality is not so simple.

**Tableaux vivants:** Students were given themes that they interpreted with still images. The themes were violence, love, bullying, travel, work, old, young or whatever came to mind. In the first round, they did not use props, and those who went on stage knew the theme but not the audience. At first they went on stage to interpret a theme one by one, then two by two, and then as a group. The audience was then given time to interpret



# CREATION

October – December

Students begin to create micro-works individually. They start to build their monologue by identifying the character traits, thinking about the structure and context of the monologue. They also talk about what questions they should be asking themselves when making the monologue such as: who I am, timing, location and environment. They work on their monologue every week in October, both in school and at home. When they meet, they receive guidance from their teacher and their classmates.

All students show their monologues and discussions are held about each work. Students begin to create works together by creating devised still images, to work out context and interpret what will happen in a scene without having a theme. The group is given the time to create a scene with three still images, create a story with opening, middle and end. Then they add words, movement and sound to the scene ending.

## WORDS + CONTEXT

Everyone writes three sentences starting with:

*At the moment ...*

*You cannot at all ...*

*You will be ...*

Then three students come up at a time and read their sentences alternately. It is a complete coincidence which sentences are read aloud and in what order, and therefore the discussions should revolve around what is created from the context.

Each person writes five sentences beginning with:

*If ...*

*And the other five that start ...*

*Then ...*

Two and two at a time go up and read their sentences alternately. The discussion of what arises from the context of these sentences is taken up again. Will there be any depth? Anything political? Emotional?

When this is done the group start to write together.

The teacher leads the discussion with the group and asks them to choose an overall idea or concept for the show. It is important to work on the idea in a group and make sure that everyone can come up with their suggestion or opinion. The work can be about anything, but the instructor must warn them that they must be interested in the topic, otherwise they will not enjoy composing the show. It is a helpful technique to use a large sheet of writing paper, or typewriter paper, where the group can write down ideas and then at the end of the discussion, they can choose an idea by writing one line under the proposal they like best.

Figure 36.2 Sample lesson plan – “Creation”



through discussion what they saw on stage and what theme this could represent. They asked themselves such questions as, What do we see? What could this be? What does distance say about the relationships between the people on stage? What does the body position say about the characters? The audience thought about it while the actors stood still in silence. Once the audience had commented, the actors were given time to explain what they meant by their still images. If the audience did not understand what the actor was trying to say, the group tried to find ways to explain what they were doing; thus the theme or plan of the actors was explained or improved. Then the exercise was repeated with a prop, with a soundtrack, outside, or some other variation.

### **The accomplishment**

Step three is the accomplishment, the performance. The group worked together on creative exercises to create scenes and characters that reflected the concept. All scenes, experiments and characters were recorded, and the instructor kept track of the recordings. The scenes that the students were happy with or wanted to record were written down in a script. The group shared roles as the script became clearer. The assembly came into effect only when the script was almost ready and the rehearsal season was about to begin, but the intention was to hold an exhibition of their work. At the end of the process, they held a workshop where they analysed the process and the script and criticised various aspects, using the methods they learned in the first part of the process. There they discussed what they had learned from the process and what methods they envisage being able to use in the future.

### **Findings**

The findings show that the arts enhance students' *social skills, self-confidence* and *literacy*. The study also shows that students building a project they can call their own empowers them to be more outspoken about what is important in their lives. It also stimulates competencies and skills such as expressing ideas, defending projects, teamwork and individual work, and it self-empowers them by helping them gain belief in their own abilities. They learn to recognise their strengths and weaknesses as well as to set goals and follow through with them. The combination of theoretical introductions and aesthetic methodology also proved to be a dynamic and inspirational approach for students as well as teachers.

The findings also indicate that students learned to stand by themselves and their decisions throughout their careers, and if we want to make art and culture alive and relevant to children and young people the obvious way is to let them engage in a creative process. They learn to stand and talk in front of others; participation builds self-confidence, and they learn not to be shy. At the same time, participation in the Dream Stage was empowering for students, as youth democracy was used in the creative process. The surprising thing was that they did not really know what they were choosing and wanted to go into something creative. When asked what effect participation in the Dream Stage had on them, we found that the importance of working on the same task as a group and influencing what is done was clear to the students. They gained faith in themselves and learned to be more outgoing. They developed more confidence. One of the students said they took part in the Dream Stage because they would like "to be able to speak in front of others and do what we did". Another student said participation builds confidence and they learned "not be so shy". They also talked about learning new games and the games being used, for example, to build their self-confidence.



# THE ACCOMPLISHMENT

January – April

Students hold discussions and look at the material they researched and their ideas. By the end of the discussion, they must have agreed on what they intend to set up.

Students set up and rehearse their final work. Premiere is in April. After the premiere, students reflect on their final product.

Figure 36.3 Sample lesson plan – “Accomplishment”



I like drama. Drama helps me be myself. In drama I learn to perform, and I learn about emotions. You can always get help in drama, and everyone is kind to you. I find drama fun.

By taking part they could have great influence on what is done and “participate in the whole process”. What was also interesting is that they would have preferred to have a Dream Stage during school hours or immediately after school. Not having a Dream Stage immediately after school means that more often than not, some students arrive late, up to an hour after the session has started:

I would just like to go straight after school – we would just go straight to drama class and that’s it.

Another says:

I feel a bit like that – you go home for half an hour or something and you have to go back to school. I just think it’s more fun if we just skip another class and go straight to drama.

The students also talked about the fact that there is no drama and no music offered at their school, and many of them chose the Dream Stage because they wanted to go into something creative. Others actually thought they were choosing something else, like *Skrekkur*, a talent competition for lower secondary schools in Reykjavík. One student said:

I think I chose this by accident, but I’m still happy with it.

Another says:

I see there was really no fun activity that I could choose, so I chose the drama. I have learned a lot in drama. I have gained confidence and I learn to be myself. I’m very grateful there’s drama in my school.

Another says:

I love drama and I think it is fun.

The students, aged 13–16 years, seem to have experienced the empowering aspects of drama education through personal empowerment, cultural empowerment, communal empowerment and social/political empowerment. Some of the students described the personally transforming aspects, such as having the courage to stand up for their views and express their ideas. This applies, for instance, to learning performance skills, building a character and gaining knowledge about their bodily engagement as part of performance skills. The students described that through the performance they learned to be more confident and that it is all right to have somebody looking at you. They learned to interact with one another in a safe space and tried out different social roles (Thorkelsdóttir, 2018). Neelands suggests that education has the means to render visible, and discussable through drama, the otherwise invisible influence of culture.



The observation of the performance bore clear witness to the communal empowering force of the performance as an act of community hopes, fears and dreams. The social and political empowering aspects are not so visible, but the performance can be seen as a rehearsal for change and an arena for dialogue through the theme of the story performed. The students talked about the lack of art subjects and the absence of drama or music from the school even though the curriculum clearly states that both subjects should be included.

### Conclusion

Imagination, creativity and innovation are present within every human and can be nurtured and applied, and there is a strong connection between these three core processes. At the beginning we asked the question: *What are the effects of creativity and artistic work on the self-image of teenagers working in art?* The impact is strong. The students learn about art by taking part in it. Thus, arts education was placed at the centre of the project, providing the students with opportunities for working in and through drama and the arts. Through the project they learned to express themselves by entering into dialogue with others (Biesta, 2018) and to appreciate art by creating it (Abbs, 2003). The combination of sensory, cognitive and affective knowing makes drama and the arts special and potentially provides aesthetic knowledge. This potential is connected to embodied learning, which can be a very promising and interesting prospect. In the rehearsing of the play, the embodied learning was connected to sensory and cognitive learning through games and drama activity leading to the play's performance. They show why the arts matter for developing different kinds of understanding, including critical thinking, cooperation in complex tasks and democratic decision-making. Learning in and through the arts can strengthen the student's sense of self-identity through expression and communication, as the arts education is embedded in the social and cultural understanding of each country. The unique qualities of the Dream Stage project are that it gives young people the opportunity to work in the arts on their own terms and through youth democracy. Projects such as the Dream Stage, where students work purposefully with drama, are highly significant, as through the study of arts subjects students develop certain skills less easily acquired via other subjects. Thus, art can, with good reason, claim to be a facet of education. The significance of the project in a wider context, both for education and for society, is considerable. In education, when working with artistic processes, the students strengthen and develop different kinds of skills, and, in addition to being an important part of education, projects like this are examples of unique experiences. From a social point of view, the project can both strengthen and influence the students' culture and the community centre, giving all students, regardless of social status, the opportunity to take part in an art project. As stated in a report compiled by UNESCO, the rapport created by collaborative projects of this kind (connecting diverse arts and education systems) should give rise to the aim of making arts and culture central to all education (UNESCO, 2011, p. 11). Through the medium of art, students can create new aesthetic knowledge and enhance their human aspirations and experiences.

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