Learning to Empathise: Students learning to understand disabilities through drama and theatre; implications for teacher professional development

John Dwyfor Davies & John Lee
University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

Much is written about the difficulties experienced by young people on the Autistic Spectrum regarding the difficulties that many experience in communicating with others. Indeed, difficulties in this area of functioning have become a focus for many attempts to describe Autistic behaviour. A major concern that arises from such practice is that all too often, observers wrongly assume that young people who can be described as functioning along aspects of that spectrum are devoid of the ability to communicate effectively with others. It may therefore come as some surprise to many that the work undertaken at UWE over recent months is located not only in the area of young people experiencing autistic behaviour communicating with others but in a successful venture that uses the communication skills of these young people draw the attention of their peers in mainstream settings to the inequities associated with the prejudices many harbour about life as a young person with special educational needs.

There are at least two aspects to this work that are worthy of highlighting. In the first instance, the benefits for mainstream schools and their pupils in engaging with productions scripted and performed by pupils with varying degrees of disabilities can be observed and recorded. Similarly, the value for the pupils performing in this way is also potentially powerful and offers benefits in many important areas of learning and developing. Here we attempt to draw lessons learnt that impact on both aspects.

Much is written about the negative consequences of being educated in settings other than the mainstream. Not least, the 'isolation' that can accompany such an experience, together with its accumulative effect on self-esteem and the emotional and social development of pupils concerned. Accusations are also made that such an education tends to provide limited challenges to 'stretch' a child's potential. Yet, where alternative provision is perhaps the only realistic form of provision likely to meet a child's needs, many mainstream colleagues are too frequently reluctant to offer opportunities to incorporate mainstream resources into the educational and social experiences of the ‘alternative’ child – due in part perhaps, to resource considerations or again, to impact on government targets. Where this is the case, it is suggested that such behaviour is both unprofessional and inhumane.

Where there is willingness to offer some experience of mainstream experience to pupils who need alternative provision, it is an exception to find teachers who believe that the pupils with special needs can possibly have much to offer their more fortunate peers in mainstream schools. Our experience of this experiment suggests that where teachers are brave enough to invite these children into their schools – with a clearly set role to play, its positive impact can be disproportionate (for all concerned) but for the pupils with special needs in particular.

This work concerns a drama production developed with a group of young people all of whom had been assessed and held a statement of need on the grounds of Autism. In November 2004, a small drama company, “Fairgame”, comprising of a director, a musician, designer, worked intensively with a group of young people with learning difficulties for five days to establish a story, characters and style for the theatre piece. Throughout this time, the older and more able students from one special school took on a mentoring role for the younger participants and helped sustain their involvement at times of difficulty.

This first phase of the project was followed by four days when video shots were taken and where the students operated all equipment and acted the necessary roles. During that time, the production
team firstly took students from the special schools to interviewing members of the public on the street and in local businesses in a local market town. Their responses to questions about issues such as special educational needs and on the subject of Autistic Spectrum in particular, were documented.

Rehearsals then took place and the scenes were devised in workshops. Other workshops were also held where pupils from the special schools, working with a songwriter, produced and recorded their own song. This was used in the soundtrack of the final video.

The classroom scenes were rehearsed and shot. This scene was designed to depict some of the challenges that these pupils face. Members of the drama company established feedback session to discover what students felt about the project up to that point and to arrange support where it was felt that this was necessary.

A final filming day was undertaken involving participants from the Stroud Autistic Society membership. This provided material for links between the footage already obtained.

A professional editor tutored the students in the use of the “Final Cut Pro” editing software on a one-to-one basis. Students then assisted in making editing decisions and were able to cut and edit some of the scenes themselves. Subsequently, a completed video was reproduced in DVD format and distributed to all participants and many others with an interest in the project.

Finally, the production was tested on an invited audience and then performed to pupils and teachers at mainstream comprehensive schools.

Minor changes were made on the basis of immediate feedback from these audiences and the final version of the set slightly modified, before touring began.

Flyer design was completed; incorporating artwork produced by one of the workshop students.

Evaluation
A substantive evaluative exercise was undertaken by researchers form the University of the West of England, Bristol. This examined the impact and consequence of that process and considered the short-, mid- and long-term implications for all concerned.

The evaluation drew on visual, documentary and interview data. The visual data was the DVD produced by the project team and the documentary evidence the supporting documents drawn up by the company.

Interviews were conducted with a variety of interested participants. The research team drew up semi-structured interview schedules and contemporary field notes and recordings were used. The nature of the interviews was as follows.

In depth interviews were conducted with:
- Members of Fairgame Company,
- Teachers in a large comprehensive school where the production had been used,
- Teachers in two special schools where students had participate as actors and others as audience.

These interviews yielded rich data. The focus of these interviews was on educational value resulting from participation as well as the extent that engaging in this activity has helped them refine and develop their particular skills.

Group interviews were conducted with:
- Students participating in the project.
- Students attending a mainstream comprehensive school.
- Teachers in mainstream schools where the production had been used
- A group currently studying in a Further Education college who had been involved in the technical and artistic production of the DVD and the dramatic performance were also interviewed.
• Students from special schools involved with the project.

The focus of the interviews with participating students was on how the project led to the development of self confidence, technical skills and the extent to which they felt the project had enabled them to communicate information about specific disabilities.

Interviews were conducted with teachers in a large comprehensive school. The focus of these interviews was on the perceived impact of the performance on the secondary school students and the way that this production was drawn upon to enrich student learning and the curriculum experience with particular reference to the way it was used to support the more emotive aspects of learning and in exploring issues that are often regarded as too ‘delicate’ or problematic to engage with.

All interviewees were asked to comment on the educational and social value of the project and also to speculate on the use of similar work in the future. Teachers were also asked to identify other themes or topics that would be suitable for addressing through this kind of production.

The data was analysed using the following categories. These categories were constructed from the interview responses:

• Main strengths and limitations of the production
• Engaging with others and raising awareness
• Technical development and new experiences
• Exploring emotions and raising awareness
• Support for the curriculum and pupils’ learning development
• Views about the relationship building between the schools involved:
• Views of special school staff about the way that the work could be further promoted:
• Staff views about how the experience could have been enhanced on another occasion:

1 Authentication

School staff, in common with members of the production team, identified the level of authenticity as one of the key features of the production. They suggest that that the extensive efforts made to ensure authenticity was a key element in enhancing its value to participants and observers alike. Members of the drama company informed us that they had worked long and hard at ensuring that this would be the case and on reflection were convinced that they had succeeded in this. As professional actors, the ability to achieve this was not new to them; as to be successful in that profession this was a necessary component. To ensure that the production of the play produced and acted by the pupils from special schools however, had added an additional dimension to that task and whilst proving challenging, it was felt that they had been successful in this. So convinced were they of this that they assured us that ‘authenticity’ would become a hallmark of their subsequent productions too.

This ‘authenticity’ is a feature that gives the work real credibility and the power to impact forcefully on young people. As a part of our evaluation, care was taken to explore the extent to which others shared the optimism of the drama team in this respect.

It was suggested to us that an integral component that made it possible for the team of students form special schools to portray their work with authenticity had been the way that the young people themselves had been closely involved in the production at each stage as well as taking a key role in the development of the plot. The value of such an approach has also convinced the production team that this should be a further characteristic that they intend to employ in developing further work.

• “The product addresses the main theme of ‘Inclusion’. It has enabled us to help give a voice to pupils with Asperger Syndrome and to do this from different angles and perspectives. To achieve this in an authentic way, we had to familiarise ourselves with syndrome through observation, wide background reading and discussions. The authenticity of the work was further enhanced by involving the young people themselves have been involved in every aspect of its production. They have been helping to shaping it – including in designing and producing the advertising material”.
Main strengths of the production

5 Technical development and new experiences

Through their production – and the methods developed by Drama Company to design and produce the production, the young people who participated in the exercise were provided with opportunities that would have normally fallen well outside their normal curriculum diet. It is not the norm for pupils in special schools in the UK to be introduced to the technology and methodologies associated with producing presentations of this nature and of recording these using high technologies. This exercise made this possible for the pupils recruited for this production and its educational and personal value was clearly substantial.

- Taking part in this production provided important ‘hands-on’ experiences for these students of how productions and films are made.
- The workshops gave them [the students] a valuable opportunity to develop and to learn new performance skills, i.e. camera work etc.
- They learnt many new skills that they would not have had the opportunity to otherwise.
- Overall, my response is, of course. Positive: it was a great opportunity for the students to be involved in the making of the film.
- As a musical, the use of song (I believe written by a student) is great.

One of the students had developed very high levels of skills in camera and sound work. A significant consequence for him through working on the project has been the fact that he has now good contacts with a professional in television sound production. He sees the prospect of a career in the industry. Others mentioned that the work could also lead to accessing further opportunities for work experience.

- I can use the camera and set up shots and now work at a more professional level.
- It helped you use the equipment it was real not a practice.
- We got a lot of technical help.

Such exposure to an extended and exciting curriculum is all too often rare for these pupils. Its potential long-term value is clearly identified by the modified (yet realistic) aspirations of some of these pupils.

2 Opportunities to engage with others and awareness raising

The pupils who had either actively participated in the production, in common with those in both special and mainstream schools were of the opinion that this exercise had held great benefits in terms of enabling them to gain direct experience of other peers who have experienced a different learning environment due to circumstances beyond their control. Where as previously, they harboured many misunderstandings and prejudices relating to each other, those in mainstream settings found the impact of this experience to be of fundamental significant to them in revising their understanding of disability.

In this instance, such close engagement of the pupils in the development of the production had the added bonus of addressing many of the difficulties experienced by the young people. For many young people who are experiencing difficulties associate with being on the Autistic Syndrome, they often find difficulty in engaging with others using the normal conventions. The expressive arts, and drama in particular, is a vehicle that is ideally suited to engage them in activities that involve making direct contact with others and expressing themselves. All too often, such activities are not taken explored adequately within the normal curriculum experience of many such students – frustrated further in some cases where concern over ensuring that externally imposed standards and targets are met, tends to diminish expressive opportunities within the curriculum to a secondary position (unless it can be incorporated under the guise of ‘speaking and listening’ as described in government
guidance documents. Where young people who inherently hold difficulties in communicating are concerned, drama of this nature has much to commend it and this was observed by many of our respondents across settings.

- “Drama is all about cooperation. The skills needed to cooperate have to be learnt and for Autistic children and young people especially, these skills are very important to acquire. Drama is an excellent means of helping them develop these skills”.

- By being so intricately involved in the production, they were given a voice, they learnt new skills, engaged in activities such as songs, acting etc. something that many Autistic people find difficult and are protected from.

- Through participating in this way, they have been able to expand their ideas of what they are capable of doing.

- This has helped many to develop an interest in a social activity – a real problem for young people with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

- Drama helps young people learn to be better communicators and to make eye contact, to learn to touch and be touched.

Pupils in the special schools readily articulated the key intentions of the exercise, as they perceived it. They were under no illusion that this was only another play produced as a part of the school’s activities. The centrality of the intention to raise awareness was high in their consciousness – possibly enhanced by the attention paid by the production team to ensure authenticity, as described elsewhere.

Bravely perhaps, the exercise had involved pupils with Autism engaging with adults and young people in the community through collecting views about what the ordinary ’man-in-the-street’ knows about special educational needs in general and Autism and the Autistic spectrum in particular. The structured task of then recording and later, relaying and discussing the responses had immense value to these young people. On the one hand, they expressed shock and disbelief that few of their respondents had any real understanding of Autism – and many had openly admitted not knowing of its existence, on the other, they rejoiced in the opportunities that this then gave them to raise awareness in the locality (and hopefully beyond). The drama production way a key to how they would set about this task.

- “We went into Tewkesbury and asked the public what they knew/understood about the terms Asperger, epileptic, AD/HD, ESBD/ Dyslexia, Turrets, Dysphasia, Deafness etc. All conditions that pupils here have. We were amazed that only one person we spoke to knew what Autism was! They also had no idea what ADHD was!”

For many, the realisation that despite labouring with this condition on a daily basis, there were others in the same community that had no knowledge of its existence, let alone an understanding of its implications for the individuals concerned had an immediate and profound impact. This had sharpened their awareness of the ignorance of the majority of the population about their condition and special educational needs in general – together with the prejudices emanating from such ignorance, enhanced their determination to do something to rectify the situation.

Helping to raise general awareness amongst the general public and amongst pupils in mainstream schools was thus seen as the core task confronting them.

- What we were trying to do [through the exercise] was to get over to members of the public what having a disability is like.

And they felt that the work was extremely important in informing the general public about disability.

- It sort of gave them [(public] ideas about what it means to be Aspergers. It was odd they didn’t know anything about it.
The value of the project for many of these students, for whom communicating with others is notoriously difficult, was magnified by the demands it had made on them in participating in an exercise that demanded they engage with others in order. In the first instance, to find out what they knew about disability:

- I was able to sort of talk to people I found that hard before this project.

Engaging with each other through opportunities to discuss the collective outcome of these enquiries offered additional opportunities to communicate and engage in ways that many had not previously experienced.

This was enhanced when teachers capitalised on the opportunity to draw on the video of the final production as the basis for the pupils involved in its production to discuss issues that previously were had been difficult or painful to explore. This included discussion about peers whose behaviour had long puzzled and worried them. These discussions enabled them to better understand the difficulties confronted by others with whom they worked and socialised on a daily basis.

It is interesting to note that some of these students had quickly realised the potential for extending the use of the production (in the form of a CD or video) to help raise awareness amongst pupils in mainstream.

- The children thought that it would be helpful if the video/cassette [showing the production] was taken to other [mainstream] schools. It would help raise awareness in mainstream pupils.

The older students emphasised how the project material would make “others” understand their position.

- It helps them understand.
- It’s good to talk about the issue but I prefer the video.

This theme is further developed in the section entitled

3 Self-esteem and self-confidence

The value of this experience for the pupils involved in the production was particularly felt in terms of its impact on their self-esteem and self-confidence. It is noted above that learning within the confined environment of a small special school can be limiting if care is not taken to counter this. It is also noted that such experience can result in social isolation from peers in the community – again, where this is not directly addressed by those responsible for the pupils’ learning. The cumulative consequence of such narrow experiences is inevitable limited self-esteem and confidence.

Conversely, where opportunities are created for these pupils to engage in challenging tasks and where those tasks can be seen as valued by more fortunate peers, the impact on self-esteem and confidence can be dramatically reversed. When these opportunities provide real learning opportunities to peers in mainstream, that value can be further enhanced. Our evaluation bears witness to this.

One of the teachers based in a special school drew attention to the positive benefit to one child with severe difficulties:

- She has huge problems she has ADHD among other things but the benefit to her self-esteem in working on this project has been enormous - you saw it yourself!

It was also evident from the reactions of the pupils involved in the production that this was an experience that they had greatly enjoyed and valued:

- Time and time again, those who took part in the production keep asking if they can do another drama. They want to do something similar again.
Additionally, when the research team was collecting evidence, young people often expressed the desire to participate in similar activities on future occasions. This was not simply a perception held by the adults closely involved with the production.

4 Exploring emotions and raising awareness
Much of what has been articulated above – and even more that may remain implicit within the description and discussion relates to the powerful way that this production enabled all concerned to engage with challenging emotional issues. For young people experiencing difficulties of the kind and who are educated in special schools, finding appropriate opportunities for them to articulate and share their frustrations and to explore their emotional reactions to a wide range of circumstances is important – but often challenging. This production (together with the subsequent opportunities provided to engage in follow-up activities within the safe environment of a managed classroom, is an important dimension of this work – both for mainstream pupils and for those in special schools.

- It gave the students ownership over something that they often have absolutely no control over.
- Very good – the children were able to explain their emotions.

For pupils in mainstream schools in particular (but also for those in special setting too) the production formed an ideal vehicle through which to enhance their experience and understanding of Autistic Syndrome Disorder (as well as other learning difficulties). It is important to note that whilst those in mainstream schools appreciated the opportunity to increase their understanding of the disorder, many in the special sector also welcomed guidance in better understanding the behaviour of some of their peers.

- Discussions with the pupils revealed that it helped them to appreciate the problems of being on the ASD spectrum.
- They were also able to relate their own views about ASD spectrum to particular pupils at Standlake school.
- I felt it was important to welcome the producers with a positive attitude, largely because I saw it as an empowering, interesting event in the students' lives.
- I believe that it was a positive outlet for the expression of emotions.
- One of the most successful scenes was when the students took over the classroom – empowering, but also questioning the different versions of reality: who has the difficulties here?
- It was also good to see the argument for inclusion positively expressed: how special schools can provide a secure learning environment, for example.

The work provided the opportunity to express emotions in a very powerful manner best represented by a student’s comments about school before they entry Further Education.

- Five years of hell in my old school.

The use of video enabled these disabled students address emotional issues.

- It’s hard to put it into words but it lets others know what it’s about.

5 Support for the curriculum and pupils' learning development
Much had been achieved as a result of bringing together pupils with varying degrees of need from different schools. In particular, teachers observed the way that pupils with greater levels of learning difficulties were seen to be benefiting from social and academic interaction with pupils who functioned at a higher level. They drew our attention to the way that the more articulate pupils had succeeded in encouraging others to express views about their own disabilities and to exchange thoughts that were often suppressed.

- The more articulate young people were a great stimulus to all the others and encouraged them to express and discuss their feelings about their own disabilities and those of other peers.

Teachers in mainstream schools readily identified ways in which they make direct use of the drama production to extend and enliven the learning opportunities they provide for their pupils.
Immediate links were made between the production and areas of work addressed within the Personal, Social and Health Education within the National Curriculum.

- The production on Autism links well with our teaching of PSHE since it’s ideal to address themes around bullying, difference, respect etc. We also use this with the younger age range in the school. This was piloted on a group of Year 10 students a month ago.

Participation in this work also held additional value for pupils in the special schools involved. A special schoolteacher drew our attention to some of the ways that the curriculum had been enriched as a consequence. The children had been challenged to rewrite the story of the performance.

- “It was called Lily Frown of Mary Down and all the children had real purpose for writing a sort of fairy story. It led to a huge display - we’ve kept it all.”

The work also had benefits for these pupils in terms of the work required at Key Stage 3 in the National Curriculum. Speaking and Listening (of which drama is a part) are prioritised in the curriculum.

- “Speaking and listening have always been things we’ve had to focus on because in special schools children don’t read and write speaking and listening communication skills are essential.”

The potential of work such as this to enrich pupils’ experience of the the curriculum and to provide them with meaningful and constructive challenges had not escaped the production team and they claim to have had this as major aim from the outset.

- “Our work is meant to be a kind of ‘springboard’ for further discussion.”
- “Teaches get something that provides an extra impetus to the curriculum.”

6  Relationship building between the schools involved

The use of drama facilitated a speedy interaction between the pupils from the participating schools. This was necessary for the work to be developed, produced, practiced and performed in the limited space of time available. Some of those interviewed drew attention to the success of this process:

- The links between the schools [involved in the making of the production] must have been established quickly
- I visited part of the sessions and they were very involved and eager to collaborate with the youngsters from other schools.

What is perhaps even more surprising is the way that the relationships forged through this process have since been sustained – and one can only speculate as to why this has been the case:

Firm friendships have since formed and been sustained between pupils in different special schools who were involved and between the Autistic young people and pupils in other schools.

Whilst most saw positive ways that similar work could be used in different settings. By supporting pupils with learning difficulties and who attend mainstream schools, it could help overcome the invisibility of such pupils in the mainstream schools

- I’ve always been concerned for those pupils in the mainstream who become the butt of jokes and called ‘thickies’

Others were not as constructive however. Some teachers in special schools were of the opinion that work of this kind would not be possible if the pupils who had participated in this production had been attending mainstream schools:

- We offer a protected and safe environment and we were able to work with pupils from another special school.
- There are opportunities for our students to take huge risks in front of their peers – falling off a unicycle - they couldn’t have done that in mainstream.
- Forget their lines or not be able to dance - they wouldn’t take that risk in mainstream and they wouldn’t have been selected. And then, they took risks in front of strangers but again in a safe setting in another special school.
Such conservative views may well more accurately reflect the self-preservation concerns harboured by some special schoolteachers and concern about the extent to which they could be confident about their future long-term employment. It also highlights the lack of familiarity that some still harbour regarding what mainstream education offers and how it operates.

**Teacher expectations**

An incidental – but major - implication of this work was the way that some of the teachers who had seen the pupil performance reacted. Several of the teaching staff interviewed drew our attention to the fact that they too (and not only the pupils) had learnt a lot as a result of participation in the project. In the case of the special schools, the performance had been very significant in enabling the whole staff to experience the level at which their students were able to perform and in some cases, teachers were genuinely surprised by what they had been able to achieve – well in excess of their prior expectations.

One teacher offered an observation about the need for a more contemporary style to the production. She felt that had this been introduced, the students would have related even more fully to the theme and issues under consideration.

- A more contemporary style perhaps, might have engaged the students more.

**Follow-up work**

The drama company should also be acclaimed in the way it supported teachers in extending their work with students following the showing of a production. This is a feature that is not seen often enough in work of this kind and yet, Fairgame views this as central to the way it operated. Discussions with members of the company as well as with teachers in various schools clarified the importance that both parties place on this aspect of the work.

- Their follow-up work is also excellent and of high quality
- Some of the material produced is accompanied with quality follow-up resources to extend the pupil experience on the themes addressed. They engage in discussions with the pupils about issues such as slavery, equality and difference after some of the productions. They also have a video on drug and alcohol abuse. This takes the form of a ‘talking heads’ presentation and we use it with A level students. We also use Fairgame with work relating to drama production and live performances with these students.
- They also leave visiting cards for students so that they can make contact to discuss things further at a later date if they so wish.

There is also a shared understanding that whilst celebrating what has already been achieved, there is a need to develop additional strategies and resources to maximise the potential of this work:

- To maximise the potential benefits, much depends on the school following up the production.
- Follow-up activities could well include creative writing exercises and drama – we have done a lot of both here and at this school (particularly on drama techniques). In fact, we once sent some of the work done on drugs and alcohol to the LEA coordinator for such work as an example of what can be done).
- It’s surprising how students get a handle on complex issues – how they can understand difficult things about ‘difference’.

Interestingly and crucially, suggestions were also offered for materials that teachers could use to support not only their own work and curriculum development but to assist in supporting pupils who had siblings or relatives who themselves had ASD or other difficulties addressed in a production. Experience suggested that it was not unusual for several pupils in mainstream schools to express anxiety for these reasons.

A few suggested that some form of pre-production material to explore shortly before a show so that pupils were aware of and prepared for issues raised in the drama. Subsequent discussion with the staff from the drama company suggested that they did not share the teachers’ enthusiasm about this, not least, because it would reduce the impact of the production as a result of the audience being ‘over prepared’.

**Professional Development for School Staff**
Potential for use in teacher education had not escaped those professionals involved with this exercise. Their collective enthusiasm about its impact was almost contagious and they were keen to explore how it might be possible to encourage others adopt similar resources at both initial and subsequent professional training opportunities.

- Our work has much to offer Initial Teacher Training too. It can be used to introduce what is meant by AS and its implications. They can use this to explore what as teachers; they will need to adapt in order to meet the needs of these pupils.
- Perhaps anInset for teachers could include a package on the background research (on ADHD or Autism for example) to give further support and ideas to teachers as to how to develop this work following the presentations.

It is equally possible that other related areas of professional development activities could well draw upon this work – and in particular, the areas of social work and criminal justice training.

- Fairgame is working towards developing a 'portable' model so that this kind of work can be developed in other areas. It has proven to be an ideal way in which to work with young people and to challenge them so as to develop their thinking. I feel that there is much to be done using this model in the area of 'Ethnicity' etc.

Areas that could be explored for further development of resources to address prejudice and attitude could usefully include considerations such as:
  - Support for pupils who have siblings who have ASD or have members of the wider family who have ASD.
  - Guidance to professional staff including: web addresses; contact addresses; books to read etc.
  - Material to support subsequent discussion around themes such as how to handle and relate to others who are ‘different’.

The potential for exploring other complex and challenging themes that are contemporary and of particular concern to many educationalists.

- The subject must be interesting but also relevant and current.
- The company could well develop its work to cover sensitive themes such as ‘racism’ or ‘Islamic phobia’.

Mainstream teachers interviewed were particularly keen that subsequent work should be developed to fit within the PSHE curriculum area, so that they could draw upon it for support, much in the way that this production had been used.

- For future work, I’d say that its use in support of PSHE and Citizenship in schools is considerable. It can help link sensitive and important issues across the curriculum.

The drama company involved in this exercise had already observed the need to draw on their experience in extending the work to include productions around the theme of ‘Immigration’. They had already noticed that pupils’ attitude towards this issue was too often negative – despite the fact that none had any knowledge of any one who had immigrated or who was a refugee.

- Pushing them further, it became obvious that there was a huge hostility being developed amongst them regarding Muslims – especially after 9:11. I’ve always been interested in religious tolerance – and as a result of these factors, it seems natural to work on this as the next theme.

It is also the case that work of this nature is ideally suitable for addressing the needs of many young people who are viewed as challenging and potentially disruptive. Adopting the approached now being refined by Fairgame has a great potential for further exploration:

There is also room to work with disruptive, disengaged young people, using drama as the main tool. Indeed, art generally, is ideal as a medium to help such young people find ways to cooperate.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from the evidence that we have collected that this project was extremely successful. The Company chose to work with young people facing the some of the most challenging personal difficulties. Concepts such as Autistic Spectrum and ADHD are heavily contested, very emotive and
often ill understood by the general public. The fact that the project enabled them to be explained and described in a sympathetic manner is very important. The response of students and staff in both special establishments and mainstream schools showed that they felt able to discuss issues in a way that they could not do previously.

Teachers in the United Kingdom (in common with those in many other developed countries) have laboured long under regimes where the imperative of enhancing ‘standards’ and meeting artificially set targets has been the main imperative, it is perhaps refreshing to note that over recent months, an official recognition that the process of effective teaching and learning involved active engagement with the affective domain, as much as it does with the cognitive. Although this was once well understood and strategies established to sustain a balance between the two, the focus recently has been skewed inappropriately. Perhaps one contributing factor leading to circumstances that have now prompted the UK government to develop an agenda to promote the concept of ‘Respect’ amongst the youth of the country cannot be disassociated from the distancing of the two domains within the learning experience of many since 1988 at the very least. It has have long been established that teaching and learning are an emotional business concerned as much with the affective as the cognitive (see. Risebrough, 1981 and Nias, 1989), (Davies, J.D. & Lee, J. 2001) but regrettably, this reality has been ignored by policy makers for far too long.

A real consequence of an approach to education policy and development that ignores the powerful potential of engaging the affective aspects and that demands a mechanistic adherence to measurable targets at the expense of more intrinsic and substantial drivers is likely to result in a reductionism approach to self-fulfilment in the long-term. Liston and Garrison (2004) summarise this concern in a concise way:

“Daily, it seems, students are spoon-fed “educational” material, not to satiate their learning but rather to meet the mandates of the state ……. we are asked to disavow our …. Love of learning, our passion for teaching, our care and concern for our students so as to meet federal, state and district requirements. We are being ‘asked’ to dismantle the vocation and profession of teaching.” (Pp1-2) And we would add, to jeopardise the affective development of a generation of young people in the process.

Our experience in evaluating this exercise highlights the importance of drawing on the inherent potential of the expressive arts and drama in particular, within the educational experience of pupils. Arguably however, drama has not been well understood in secondary schools and colleges. For non-drama specialists it has often been reduced to the school play or turned into the academic theatre studies. Drama specialists have taken a very different view. The idea that we can consider the important differences between, learning drama, learning in drama and learning through drama has been the subject of considerable attention. For the purposes of this evaluation we draw attention to the way in which specialists such as Heathcote (1995) and Bolton (1979, 2003) focus on learning in drama. They argue that by being in role learners are able to reflect on both what they have learned and how the have learnt it. In the case of the young people involved they were enabled by the process of creating the drama, and using audiovisual materials to stand back from their day-to-day existence and objectify relationships with others. For the audience the power of the project and the learning comes from “having” to understand what the “actors” are communicating. In this case they are learning through drama.

It is clear that using drama and theatre is a very important and powerful mode of teaching and learning. It is particular applicable to addressing the affective domain of the curriculum which is currently somewhat neglected. The evidence collected suggests that the approach used by Fairgame for this production can form the basis for some radical and substantial developments in both the task of enhancing the communication skills of many young people on the Autistic spectrum (as well as their self-esteem) and at the same time, make important impacts on ensuring that young people are confronted with their own prejudices in a forum where it can be constructively explored.

References


