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Teachers' perceptions of factors determining the success or failure of drama lessons

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Abstract

Finland is witnessing an on-going debate on strengthening the role of drama in the comprehensive school; however, some studies show that teaching in drama education is challenging. This study endeavours to identify and explain the teaching factors that may determine the success or failure of drama lessons. The findings are based on both quantitative (30) and qualitative (N=6) data. According to the study, in the class teachers' post-pedagogical thinking teacher's actions (teaching, planning), group structural factors (the students, atmosphere, norms and group size) and external factors (space, time) are the three main factors play a central role in the success or failure of drama lessons.

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Keywords: Drama education; teacher's pedagogical thinking; group structural factors; Finnish teacher education

1. Introduction

Finland is witnessing an ongoing debate on the role of drama education in the curriculums of comprehensive schools. Many studies support strengthening the role of drama in comprehensive school. Studies show that teaching in drama education is challenging. Teaching drama is different from teaching most school subjects. When teaching other subjects, the teacher controls the pupils' work, movements and

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interactions in the classrooms.. The teacher controls the pupils' behaviour by the layout of desks, teaching materials and scripted teaching methods (Sawyer, 2004). The teacher restricts movement around the classroom. In contrast, classroom drama teaching usually takes place in an open space.

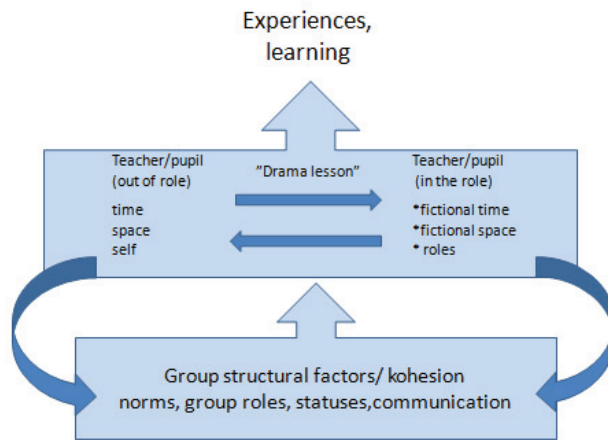


Fig. 1. Factors affecting the success of a drama lesson (Toivanen, Pyykkö & Ruismäki, 2011)

Figure 1 describes the factors affecting the success of a drama lesson. The success of the lesson means that pupils' actively participate in drama action. Teachers who use drama in education need to be able to manage time, space and bodies in an open classroom and to do so in both the social dimension of the classroom and in the aesthetic dimension of the art form (Neelands, 2009, 41-42). There has to be recognition and facilitation at the same time. Teacher's work in drama education's dual reality is challenging especially at the beginning (Toivanen, Rantala & Ruismäki, 2009; Wales, 2009; Dickinson & Neelands, 2006, 35-41; Stinson, 2009).

According to Kansanen, (1999, Tirri, 2012, 58-59, Jyrhämä & Maaranen, 2012, 97-98) teachers' pedagogical thinking is connected to a teaching-studying-learning process in the natural context of the classroom. Pedagogical thinking is characterized by setting learning objectives and having reasons for making pedagogical decisions. The nature of teachers' pedagogical thinking is implicit; it may be difficult to identify, as it may not actually be seen. A teacher's thoughts become partly visible in his or her activities, words and deeds (Kansanen, 1993, 33).

Although there is an on-going debate about the role of drama education in the curricula of the Finnish comprehensive schools (OKM, 2010; OKM, 2012:6) systematic drama education is still not implemented in every comprehensive school. Drama education methods, forms of activity and concepts have been progressively developed and structured in Finland in the past forty years, especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century by many drama and theatre pedagogy scholars (e.g., Sinivuori, 2002; Toivanen, 2002; Rusanen, 2002; Heikkinen, 2002; Laakso, 2004). Drama's teaching content in the national core curricula for basic education (2004) is nowadays placed within the subject "Mother-tongue and literature".

Mother tongue is defined as an informational, skill and artistic subject, which is divided into three sub-areas: reading and writing, literature, and language and interaction skills. Drama objectives and core contents are included under the sub-heading of interaction skills. The interaction section involves the teaching of linguistic and physical expression skills with the help of discussion, narration, play, drama

and improvisation. The curricula have no precise description of the objectives and core contents of drama education. The objectives are mainly focused on interaction skills.

2. Study Design

2.1. Research Problems, methods and data analysis

The purpose of this research is to clarify:

- 1) What factors may determine the success of drama lessons, from the teacher's point of view?
- 2) What factors may determine the failure of drama lessons, from the teacher's point of view?

The study used both simple quantitative (for getting overview) and qualitative research methods (see Silverman, 2005; Metsämuuronen, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The questionnaire was sent to 157 class teachers in May 2011. It was addressed to teachers working in the schools where the school curriculum included the teaching of drama. Thirty teachers (22 women, 8 men) answered the questionnaire. Their teaching experience ranged from one to 36 years; on average, it was 23 years. The competence of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire ranged from experience with a single drama course to intermediate drama courses. All of the interviewees specialized in drama education.

The response percentage was only 19, which can be moderate in electrical inquiry (Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara, 2009). The response percentage may have been low because the questionnaires were sent in May during a time when teachers are busy evaluating students. The questions on the questionnaire were open and they were eventually classified to three main sections. The responses were based on the teachers' ideas and experiences of drama education.

After that the material has been deepened and focused on the theme interview (N=6). The theme interview was transcribed verbatim, at first, and then the material was divided into different themes (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Kvale, 2007). The themes and the different subcategories arose from the material. The analysis units were chosen from the research material and the theory was utilized to provide guidelines for the analysis. In the theory-driven content analysis, the data collection can be carried out quite freely and the role of the theory will be emphasized at the end of the analysis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009, 96-97, 150).

3. Results

In the results of this study, teachers' responses to the questionnaire and interview represent their drama teaching-related post-pedagogical thinking. The successful drama lesson in this study means pupils' commitment and active participation in drama action and an unsuccessful drama lessons means that pupils were not involved or excited about the drama lessons actions.

Figure 2 illustrates the drama activities the class teachers participating in the study used in their work. Fifty-three percent of the activities can be interpreted to have been a classroom drama, 27% were drama as a teaching method and the remainder was theatre and other dramatic activities. Teachers were also asked how much time they spent on drama education weekly. Fifty percent of the respondents regularly used at least an hour a week for drama and 25% of teachers used 1-2 hours a week for drama. Twenty percent of the respondents said they use drama in education even more often than two hours a week. Seven percent of the respondents reported that their use of drama was irregular.

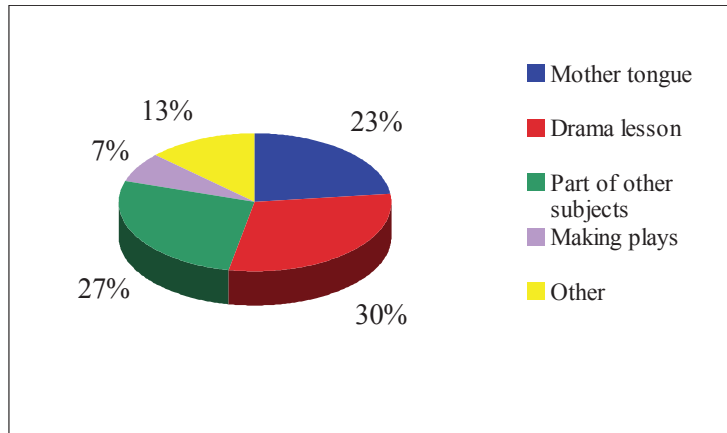


Fig. 2. Classroom teachers' use of drama

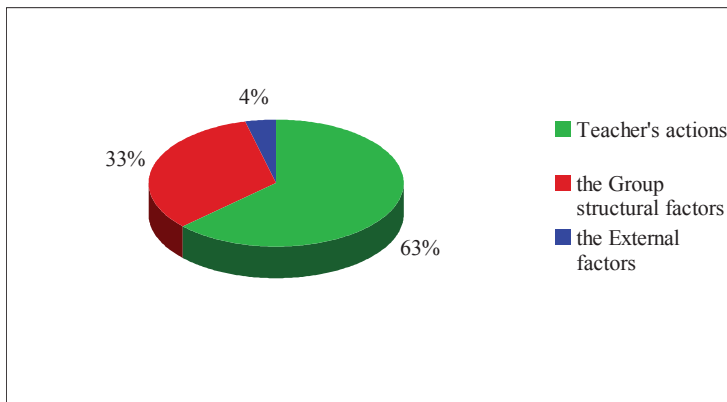


Fig. 3. Teachers' perceptions of factors determining the success of drama lessons

The respondents named three main categories considering the success and failure of drama lessons. The main categories are teachers' actions, group structural factors and external factors. When class teachers were asked about the success factors of drama lessons, the most mentioned response was considering the teacher's actions. Sixty-three percent of the responses related success to the teacher's actions. Toivanen, Pyykkö and Ruismäki (2011) had similar findings in their study. The second mentioned category was group structural factors. Thirty-three percent of the responses concerned group structural factors. Toivanen, Pyykkö and Ruismäki (2011) have also found that group members' roles and statuses have a significant impact on the success of drama lessons. The roles of the group also directly influence other factors such as group norms, and teacher and student interaction. Only four percent of the teachers responded that resources (space and time) affected the success of drama lessons

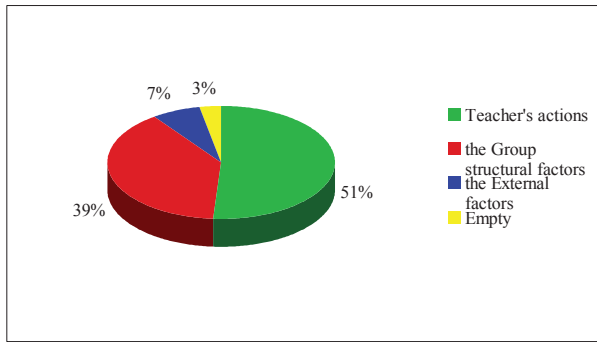


Fig. 4. Teachers' perceptions of factors contributing to the failure of drama lessons

On the other hand, teachers' actions were also the most mentioned category when asked about the factors contributing to the failure of drama lessons: a little more than half (51%) of the responses concerned teachers' actions. Group structural factors were mentioned in 29% of the responses, and external factors in 7%.

3.1. Pre-interactive and interactive teaching skills

Drama teaching requires a variety of skills (e.g., Østern, 2000; Heikkinen, 2005b; Saebø, 2009; Toivanen, 2010), and therefore this main category includes four subcategories: 1) teaching skills (including classroom management, continuity and drama teaching experience); 2) planning and goals (including knowledge of the pupils); 3) enthusiasm and 4) confidence. Planning and setting goals are indirect educational activities that occur before the teaching (pre-interaction). Teaching skills (including classroom management, continuity, and drama teaching experience), enthusiasm and confidence are part of direct educational interaction that occurs in the actual teaching-learning situation (Kansanen, 1999). All these different skills were mentioned in the questionnaire.

According to teachers, *the planning* of the drama lesson leads to the success of drama lessons. The planning supports especially inexperienced teachers. However, planning must be flexible, because anything can happen during a drama lesson. If the teacher plans too strictly or does not plan at all, it is likely that the drama lesson will fail. Owens and Barber (2009, 15) support this approach by saying that planning is an important part of teaching drama. They point out that pre-planning which provides security for teachers—especially inexperienced teachers. Dickinson and Neelands (2006, 36) state that drama in particular is characterized by unpredictability and the teacher cannot know what might happen during the lesson, how the students will take part, or what the outcome of the lesson might be. In order to succeed in a lesson, the teacher must be flexible in planning (Dickinson and Neelands, 2006, 38).

Both teachers and students need to know what the goals of the drama lesson are so the drama lesson can succeed. If a teacher has not thought about the goal of the drama lesson, the lesson will fail. One of the teachers explained this process: "*You need to know all the time, in what direction you are taking the drama lesson. If you don't, the lesson will get out of control.*" (Oili, interview) This observation is also supported by Toivanen (2007).

When the teacher *knows the students*, she or he is able to make decisions that support student development and learning in drama. In other words, the drama lesson is successful when the teacher is able to support the students. On the other hand, if a teacher does not understand the students, the student

may have to do something that the student is not ready for in a drama lesson. Thus, the drama lesson could fail.

Classroom management, continuity, experience of teaching drama, enthusiasm and confidence are skills that affect *direct interaction* in the classroom education-learning process. The interviews show that the functionality and variety of the drama, compared to other subjects, emphasize the importance of class management. If a teacher cannot manage the class in action or the roles of pupils in the fictional space, the drama lesson fails. Dickinson and Neelands (2006) support this by saying that the teacher's classroom management skills are emphasized in teaching drama, because drama is interactional and functional. Students do not sit quietly in place, but are actively involved in the drama sessions.

In addition to classroom management skills, a drama teacher should present drama lessons on an incremental basis; this gradual development supports the success of drama lessons. Thus, students learn about drama and working practices gradually, with the result that students can practise drama as their skills increase. On the other hand, if a teacher expects students to have more skills that are not yet practised, the lesson will fail. Toivanen (2010) has made similar observations.

When the teacher has more experience teaching drama, she or he is able to make decisions that contribute to the success of an hour. Limited experience in teaching drama, in turn, leads to the experience of failure because the teacher does not know how students should act in the drama lesson (cf. Saebø, 2009; Wales, 2009; Howell & Heap, 2010; Toivanen et al., 2010). One teacher commented on the effects of the lack of experience: "*When you do not have enough experience, then there is no courage and confidence that this thing could go in that direction, or that is worth a try.*" (Jarkko, interview)

A teacher's enthusiasm transmitted to pupils and motivates them to work drama. Conversely, if the instructor is not excited the drama teaching, it may be that drama is not taught at all. Toivanen (2007, 24) writes that teaching drama education requires enthusiasm, which is shown in teaching as well as the teacher's attitude. Owens and Barber (2010, 50) point out that in order to succeed in teaching drama, drama teacher must be in good spirits.

Teachers highlighted the need for courage and confidence in drama teaching. Their responses show that the teacher has to indulge in drama education, if she or he wants the drama lesson to succeed. For example, one teacher explained how involved a teacher must be: "*If a teacher dares to indulge herself in roles and be involved in drama education, the children will want to participate*". (Oili, interview). Toivanen (2010, 36) emphasizes that pedagogical courage, or daring to take risks is at least as important to the drama lesson as the teaching skills. When the teacher is ready to put her/himself on the line, the students become excited about the drama and work more boldly and with greater enthusiasm.

3.2. The Group structural sub-factors that explain the success or failure of the drama lessons

In the teachers' responses, group structural factors played a major role in the success or failure of drama lessons. Johnson and Johnson (2009, 24-25) have explained that group structural factors consist of the interaction between the different roles and norms. In addition, *group size* is included in the category group structural factors in this study because the size of the group affects the interaction between the students and the teacher (see Pennington, 2005). Himberg and Jauhiainen (1998, 116) have confirmed this by writing that in a small group, members of the group have a greater impact on each other than in a large group. The other three subcategories are *atmosphere, students and norms*. The results also show that the large size of the group complicates the drama lesson. When there are many students in a class, it is more difficult for the teacher to control and monitor the students. On the other hand, when the drama lesson is very well designed and prepared, the drama lesson can also be a great success with a large group.

According to teachers, a good and trusting atmosphere in a classroom will increase the success of drama lessons. Owens and Barber (2010, 50) estimate that the atmosphere is the most important factor

after teaching skills in teaching drama. When trust has been established, all members of the group have the confidence to participate. They are not self-conscious, and do not have to be afraid of failing during drama lessons. In turn, an ambiguous and judgmental atmosphere, leads to students questioning the drama teaching and inhibits the desire to participate in the drama lesson.

In this study, according to the teachers, the pupils' active participation in drama education promotes the success of drama lessons. Pupils' interference with the teaching seemed to cause the failure of drama lessons. It was often mentioned that especially the students with special needs were unable to work in the world of drama (cf. Dickinson & Neelands, 2006, 126; Owens & Barber, 2010, 51). Teachers mentioned the challenge of working with students who interfere with other pupils, as they cannot focus on practice and refuse to take part in the drama lesson. One teacher described his experience: “. . . [students] such as opinion leaders, or leaders or saboteurs will stop working with drama and encourage their friends to do the same”. (Paavo, interview) It is noteworthy that the pupils' impact on the success of drama lessons was in sixth place (see figure 5), but students were stated in the second place in subcategories.

Teachers find that norms contribute to the success of a drama lesson. In this study, norms are understood as rules that are jointly created by the group (drama contract) (cf. Johnson & Johnson, 2009, 25-28). When the group is committed to the drama contract, experiences of success can be achieved during a drama lesson. In turn, if the students are not able to work in the way required, the lesson will fail.

3.3. External factors in the success or failure of drama lessons

This main category includes responses that are related to resources that affect teaching. This category includes two subcategories *space* and *time*. Only four percent of the responses related to resources, when the teachers were asked about drama education success factors. Seven per cent of the responses concerned resources when the failure of drama lessons was examined. In other words, teachers say that resources affect drama lesson failure more than its success.

Teachers who mentioned the physical space felt that the school's classrooms are not designed for drama teaching. One teacher described her experiences: “They will start immediately to climb chairs and book shelves . . .” (Inkeri, interview) Classes have too many distractions, which make it difficult for the pupils to concentrate on the drama lessons (cf. Baldwin, 2008; Dickinson & Neelands, 2006; Owens & Barber, 2010).

According to the teachers, the school's timeframe and schedule make drama teaching a challenge. They claim that the other school subjects that are in the Finnish curriculum have higher priorities in teaching. The limited time do not strain the teachers, if the teacher knows how to drive the drama education as part of her teaching. (cf. Neelands, 2004.)

4. Conclusions

The main result of this study is the three main factors of successful drama lesson (see Figure 6). Study provides evidence that the teacher's pre-interactive and interactive drama pedagogical competence play a central role in the success and failure of drama lessons. A teacher has to have the knowledge and skills of indirect pedagogical interaction in planning drama lessons. The study gives also some indication that the teacher using drama in education has to manage a variety of teaching skills in direct pedagogical interaction. In addition to personal features, a teacher has to be enthusiastic about teaching drama and have the courage and confidence to allow him- or herself to engage in the serious playfulness (Heikkinen, 2002; 2004) of drama teaching. Drama education literature (see, e.g., Neelands, 2004; Vehkalahti, 2006; Baldwin, 2008; Owens & Barber, 2010; Heikkinen 2005; Toivanen, 2007, 2010) supports the findings of this study.

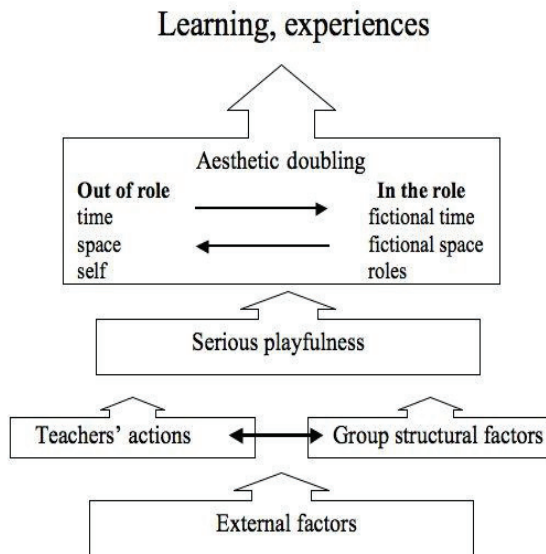


Fig. 6. The main factors of successful drama lesson.

The results of this study also confirm findings of the previous research of the same drama teaching related research series (Rantala, 2009; Toivanen, Rantala & Ruismäki, 2009; Toivanen, Komulainen & Ruismäki, 2011; Pyykkö, 2010; Toivanen, Pyykkö & Ruismäki, 2011, Antikainen, 2012). Teaching drama in the empty space requires the teacher's physical and mental involvement more than teaching many other school subjects. Furthermore, the success of drama education depends on the teacher's skills and the engagement and level of trust in creating the group. The empty space of classroom drama teaching is especially challenging for teaching because there has to be recognition and facilitation at the same time. Teacher's goals, planning and actions in actual teaching-learning situation have to achieve balance between mindfulness and playfulness in drama work. Experiences of success and learning affect the subsequent drama lessons creating either positive or negative expectations for both pupils and the teacher.

It can be concluded that there should be more drama training in class teacher education. In addition, the practices of teaching should include training in teaching drama. Thus, the teacher students could exercise their interactive drama pedagogical skills, which are needed in teaching classroom drama, in safe surroundings with the support of the training school teacher and teacher trainers. Teacher education should also provide more knowledge about drama education and group dynamics as well as solutions to classroom situation that will help to improve teacher students' pre-interactive drama skills.

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