

***Scottish Government
Education
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DRAWING THE THEATRICAL EXPERIENCE:

**AN INVESTIGATION INTO
CHILDREN'S THEATRE**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sponsored Research

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* Since the preparation of this report the Scottish Executive has been renamed the Scottish Government, but references to the old name are retained in the body of the report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

This study investigated how primary school children watch live theatre. The research was conducted through a series of participative workshop, using drawing and conversation to gather the children's own accounts of their experiences. The research also sought to provide insights into three areas of cultural policy debate.

Quality in Children's Theatre

'Quality' is a term often avoided in cultural policy research due to its resonances with ideas of taste, subjectivity and elitism. Quality is difficult to measure. Quality, however, is also central to all arts experiences. When applied to children's theatre quality also connects directly to the ambitions held for the audience and for their experiences. Perceived in terms of ambition, quality in children's theatre demands art form experiences that are rich, distinct and that seek to provide pleasure and establish resonances that endure beyond the moment of the performance itself. Quality is about having respect for the abilities of the child audience and consideration for what they can bring to a production as active spectators and interpreters.

Theatre as Education

Theatre and the arts play an important role in the broad development of children, contributing directly to both formal aspects of the education curriculum and to informal areas of child development ('educating the whole child'). Within this area there are a broad spectrum of benefits that are perceived as deliverable through an arts education. Implicit within such perceptions is the idea that the theatrical encounter has an impact beyond the immediate experience itself. This research suggests that this can be the case *if* active steps are made to extend the children's engagement. One of the challenges for teachers and cultural coordinators is to seek ways of actively engaging children as viewers in a manner that does not educationalize perceptions of the art form but instead allows children to engage more deeply on critical and creative levels. To fulfil this objective it is necessary to ensure that teachers have the skills, confidence and resources to effectively extend children's engagement with theatre on intellectual, emotional and aesthetic levels.

Audience Development

Early years arts experiences are frequently articulated as vital in an individuals' long-term engagement with the arts. The evidence for this is patchy, with persuasive arguments suggesting that other elements (and particularly other people, rather than the experiences themselves) play a much larger factor. Concern for audience development also has the potential to shift emphasis from the present to the future, with children valued for the audiences they *might* become rather than in their own right. This research asserts the importance of considering children as an audience and end point in their own right, and stresses the importance of knowledge and a sense of ownership to ensuring a positive and active relationship between children and theatre.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The objective of the study was to reveal children's lived experience of theatre. That is, instead of focusing on the potential utilitarian functions of arts education the study explored how theatre is experienced *as theatre*. To perceive theatre as theatre is to focus on the experience as something to be engaged with on emotional, aesthetic and interpretative levels and to explore *how* it is perceived, valued and responded to by the children themselves.

This study was designed to enhance cultural policy and educational research, as well as intuitive knowledge, by providing a detailed, analytical and methodologically grounded understanding of how young children perceive and respond to live theatre performances. By focusing on the lived experience of theatre, in thinking about art as itself, the research provides evidence of the meaning of theatre to child audiences. In doing so it enhances our understanding of what children understand, learn and remember from their live theatre experiences and assists art providers in better understanding what theatre means to target audiences, thereby aiding the encouragement of wider participation and engagement.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based upon data gathered during 11 visual arts based workshops. These were conducted in three primary schools (in Edinburgh and West Lothian LEAs) with a total of 98 children participating (47 boys, 51 girls). The children took part in whole class groups and ranged from Primary 1 to Primary 5 (ages 5 to 10). The participating schools were selected to provide a range of levels of theatre-going experience amongst the children. The workshops were focused around specific theatre productions that the children had been taken to see, by Catherine Wheels Theatre Company, Tall Stories and Teatre Refleksion . The research was conducted in collaboration with Imagine and the Bank of Scotland Children's International Theatre Festival.

The innovative research methods, and the challenge of interpreting such unusual data sets, made the development of the methodological approach a significant component of the study's findings in its own right. Indeed, the effectiveness of drawing in engaging with children's experiences of live theatre, and its potential to be proactively employed within the class room, developed into one of the project's most significant findings and recommendations.

Creative Research Methodologies

The research methodology for this study involved asking the participants to engage in a creative and reflective activity (drawing) and then through conversation to interpret and contextualise the drawings in terms of their theatrical experiences. This approach was adopted in the belief that it would relax the participants, enable communication in a form in which they were comfortable and provide valuable insights into attitudes, feelings and perceptions. The complexity of the methodology produced often ambiguous and multi-layered data and provided challenges for interpretation, but also enabled the investigation of children's lived experiences in their own terms – something that is often labelled unavailable or inaccessible.

Ethics and Research

With any project that sets out to research the experience of young people particular attention is required to ethical considerations. This study sought to position ethics as not just a logistical requirement but also as a key methodological and epistemological factor. In doing so it set out to follow many tenets of participatory enquiry, such as perceiving the children as experts in their own experiences, setting out to ensure that they gained something from the research process themselves and perceiving consent as something to be continually negotiated rather than formally endowed by parents or guardians.

Interrogating the Process

All methodological approaches impact dramatically on the kind of ‘story’ that is told in the results. It is impossible to truly evaluate any research material, or to understand its potential significance without having a sense of this process. This was perhaps particularly the case in this instance where the approach taken was so innovative, although it is also possible that we are simply more familiar with the mediating impact of more traditional research methodologies. Critical self-reflection on the research methodology is therefore a significant component of this study, especially in terms of how the participatory, group workshops, the drawing process, and the researchers’ conversational technique all impacted on the data produced.

THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Thematic or Moral Engagement

The material gathered for this project supports observations generated elsewhere that children often respond to thematic content largely in terms of recounting the experiences undergone by the characters in the production. Much more rarely is such content extracted and applied to personal experience or universalised. While this can be presented as a limitation to the ability of drama to construct new thematic or moral understandings, it is also possible to see theatre as providing valuable external models that affirm children’s own perceptions and experiences.

Imaginative Engagement

In their drawings the children overwhelmingly produced ‘referential’ depictions of the performance. That is they drew the world *evoked* by the performance (of narrative, character and illusion) rather than the material reality necessarily *seen* on stage. To an extent this affirms popular perceptions about the powerful imaginations of young children and it certainly demonstrates children’s grasp of cultural rules of representation – the children were often very aware that they were *supposed* to follow the referential experience. However, it should not be taken as suggesting that the children either did not notice or appreciate the seen (or embodied) experience of the performance.

Material/Technical Engagement

While the children’s drawings almost exclusively depicted the ‘referential’ experience, their conversations were much more complex, with layers of attention being paid to both the referential or imagined world and the seen or material (or ‘embodied’) reality of the performance. From their conversations it was clear that the children saw, remembered and were interested in both the imagined *and* real aspects

of the production. In other words they were not just following the story but also following the processes of the construction of the story. It is easy to delight in the ability of children to immerse themselves into the imaginative experience, however we should also recognise their technical engagement with the material experience (in terms of technique, skill and performance). Here children are engaging with theatre as theatre, perceiving the workings of the medium and appreciating the illusion that is being produced. Often this produced a sophisticated pleasure in its own right.

Gender

Although there was as much variation in response *within* a particular gender as *between* genders it is possible to suggest that, to an extent, boys were more frequently engaged with the material or technical experience than girls. It was the boys who more frequently produced technical representations or responses to the performances. In a culture where boys are increasingly struggling within school settings, and perhaps particularly in arts subjects and in engagement with the arts, this suggestion is significant. There may be a tendency to term girls' engagement with the referential experience as 'correct', as often this forms adults' hoped for response. However, we should celebrate the particular nature of boys' engagement and use the processes of theatrical illusion (rather than the illusion itself) as a way of engaging their technical creativity.

THE SPECTATOR EXPERIENCE

Theatrical Competency

Overall the data produced in this research, both in the form of drawings and conversations, indicated that the children possessed a strong theatrical competency. That is they had internalised an understanding of what theatre is – people on stage pretending to be or do things – and had the skills to complete the stage spectacle as something meaningful to them. The children all had the ability to 'get' a performance and to swiftly decode different theatrical techniques. This is explicitly demonstrated by their drawings, where the ability to depict the referential experience indicates the children's willingness and ability to work with and complete the illusions evoked for them by a performance. This cultural competency is largely taken for granted, it is primarily developed passively and not just through theatre but also via engagement with any number of other dramatic and media representations. This research suggests that children's theatrical competency means that the theatrical experiences we offer children need not be simple ones. The research also suggests that children might be consciously pushed to actively develop and extend their cultural competencies.

Pleasure in Spectatorship

Some of the children were not only able to unconsciously decode the theatrical performance while watching it but also had the ability (if not necessarily the vocabulary) to analyse and reflect back upon their decoding after the event. That is they had the ability to comment on and appreciate the codes and conventions being employed in the performance. The degree to which this was the case varied according to age, but also to other factors including levels of theatre-going experience. Crucially there existed clear *pleasure* in exercising this ability to read and analyse the workings of the performance. This pleasure was of the satisfaction of understanding and of employing specialist knowledge and it enhanced the children's ability and willingness to engage with the theatrical experience. While even for those children who had little

theatre-going experience possessed the skills required to 'get' the performance, greater experience provided greater competency and greater self-reflective ability and this enhanced the experience.

Learning to be an Audience

The theatre is about more than just seeing plays. The children exhibited extremely strong awareness of and interest in the whole social experience of attending a performance. The act of visiting and attending a theatre, outside of school, provides children with all sorts of models of behaviour and engagement for them to copy and adopt. This includes the benefits of being in a mixed and public audience. It is important, however, that the distinctive characteristics of the child audience (which are of distraction and mobility) is recognised and that they are not required to conform to adult expectations. To a young audience there is little more interesting and yet more intimidating, than other, older audience members. This means that we need to be aware of the importance of venue and audiences in children's cultural experiences.

EXTENDING ENGAGEMENT

Reflection through Drawing

Asking the children to produce drawings depicting something of the performance required them to think about and reflect upon aspects of their experience. Drawing helped the children look more closely and think more carefully about what they had seen, both in terms of a literal representation of the performance and investigating the underlying qualities of the production in terms of structure, form and colour. Through the process of drawing, with the engaged facilitation of the researchers, the children frequently began to remember more and to understand more deeply what they had seen and experienced.

The Power of Drawing

Asking the children to produce drawings of a performance also required them to add to what was given to them by the production. With theatre not all the information or representation appears on the stage, instead leaving much to the audience's imagination. Indeed, in many instances the audience is required to lend their imagination in order for the production to make sense. With drawing this process is made visible and concrete. The children always had to do more than depict what they had literally seen, and in doing more they also came to realise that with the performance now over they possessed a kind of playful power over the production. That is, as they made their choices, their representations came to determine the appearance of what they had seen. The power of drawing to make the experience visible invested power in the children and provided them with a sense of ownership that enhanced their experience.

Reflection through Play

A theatre performance invariably requires its audience to work with production to add to and complete the evoked representation. At times the children took this process further, producing drawings or providing responses that began with the performance but developed that impulse or idea with elements not contained within the production itself. Once children began to play with the idea provided by the production they also began to truly internalise and own the experience, using the performance to provide themselves with models of creative play. Such creative responses might not be

considered factually correct in terms of recall, but often demonstrated a strong awareness of the particular representational styles of the performance and used these to create new mini-performances. This happened most frequently with those performances that left representational space in which the children could experiment.

Extending Engagement

Children have the competencies and skills necessary to understand complex theatrical performances and to engage with them on a number of levels. However, unless children are actively encouraged to take that engagement further it exists place primarily on a limited and immediate level. That is it often lasts only the 60 minutes or so of the performance. There is nothing actively wrong with this, but to settle here would be to neglect the richness and playfulness of the responses that emerge when children *are* provided with structures through which to take the narratives or characters or techniques of a production forwards for themselves. The advantages of actively encouraging children's engagement with theatre include providing the opportunity to reflect on the messages and meanings of a production; generating a deeper understanding of the structures and styles of a performance; developing theatrical knowledge that will deepen future experiences; providing children with a sense of ownership of their experience and of the value of their own responses and opinions; and enhancing children's creative ability to engage in constructive play using the tools provided by a performance. Children's theatre can be a fabulous distraction and entertainment for 60 minutes. Or it can be that *and* a starting point for structured and facilitated play, reflection and investigation.

Suggestions for Further Research

All research prompts new horizons and possibilities for further research. In this instance three suggestions seem most crucial.

1. A longitudinal study tracing the development of a cohort of pupils from their first experience of theatre in primary 1 through to aged 10.
2. Collection, collation and assessment of current practices with regards to the provision of theatre as an art form experience in Scottish primary schools.
3. Development and dissemination of models and techniques designed to extend and enrich children's engagement with theatre.