

## Drama and Equity Education

My journey as teacher and board administrator has allowed me to make strong connections between drama methodologies and equity education policies. A focus on making inclusive curriculum a priority for schools was initiated by the Toronto Board of Education in the early 1990s. The Board's Equity Studies Department and the Drama Department co-developed many workshops, seminars, and courses related to anti-racist education. In 1993, the Equity Studies Department helped me plan and teach a three-year Additional Teaching Qualification course at the Faculty of Education of the University of Toronto. The course was titled "Anti-racist Education Through Drama." In the course, I shared my expertise in drama with teachers and administrators who had been working in anti-racist/equity education for several years and who had carved out strong reputations as equity educators.

The teachers enrolled in the Additional Teaching Qualification course had recently been introduced to drama in their schools through an in-service program called "Partners in Drama" coordinated by the Toronto Board of Education's Drama Department. In this program, artists and teachers partnered with each other and taught the curriculum through drama. During the project, participants developed a strong belief in drama as one of the most effective ways to teach students about equity issues. They had seen clear evidence of drama's potential for teaching students about other ways of looking at the world as they explored social justice issues depicted in stories, picture books, novels, historical documents, and newspaper accounts of current events. At the end of the program, the teachers requested a more in-depth study of drama as a methodology for use in anti-discriminatory teaching. Thus evolved the "Anti-racist Education Through Drama" course.

All the teachers in the course were committed to improving the effectiveness of drama in their classrooms and they wished to partner with a colleague in their school to facilitate ongoing dialogue about equity education through drama. They wished to transform their schools into places of professional study so that they could practice the methodologies they were learning in the course, confer with their colleagues about their learning, and bring questions and insights back to the group.

Teaching for equity and social justice through drama linked the various cross-curricular approaches to education that challenge racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, classism, ageism, and discrimination against persons with disabilities. By the end of the first year of the course, the teachers and I had identified four big questions that we wanted to explore together:

1. How do we build communities of learning through drama in such a way that all voices are heard and valued?
2. How do we gain awareness of the varied backgrounds and cultures of our students and celebrate that diversity?
3. How do we eliminate discriminatory behavior in schools on the part of both teachers and students?
4. How do we address the systemic imbalances of freedom and access within the educational system?

## Windows, Mirrors, and Doors: Using Metaphors in Equity Education

While teaching the course in “Anti-racist Education Through Drama,” I introduced my students to the work that academics Emily Styles and Peggy McIntosh were doing related to the SEEDS Project at Wellesley College in Toronto. These educators view curriculum as a kind of architectural structure that schools build around students. Styles’ metaphor of curriculum as window and mirror complements McIntosh’s ideas about multiple perspectives in education. Their combined thinking promotes a view of curriculum that provides students with opportunities to see not only the realities of others (curriculum as “window”) but also representations of their own realities (curriculum as “mirror”). When curriculum is conceptualized in this way, human differences as well as commonalities are validated, and students’ understanding of themselves in relation to others expands.

Styles and McIntosh encourage students and teachers to talk about “the textbooks of their lives” in order to inform conversations in their communities about education and culture. They stress that everyone’s story needs to be heard and they recognize that respectful teacher education can help make the teaching of equity in our schools respectful and effective as well.

As the course progressed and as trust grew within our group, I asked the teachers to tell one another their stories and, through their personal journals, describe how the drama activities and exercises were affecting them not only as teachers but also as people.

When Peggy Macintosh introduced the window and mirror metaphors to the Curriculum and Program Division of the Toronto Board of Education in the mid-1990s, I immediately saw a connection between these metaphors and drama. I developed a third metaphor, the door. I began to use this metaphor in the course as well as in my subsequent work in drama-in-education with the Toronto District School Board.

The door is a powerful metaphor because of its nature and function. Doors can be left ajar, they can be opened wide, and they can be shut for private discussion. In drama, we can step through a door into other landscapes and see the world from different perspectives. Screen doors let in light and air and allow us to view people, situations, and issues from a distance, filtering out impurities so that we can see things more clearly. Half-doors permit drama teachers to hide some of the truth in order to illuminate other parts of the story. There are outside doors, storm doors, and doors with glass that split light into prisms to symbolize life’s ambiguities and multiple realities. Revolving doors help us come full circle in our understanding of the complexities and nuances of the human condition. Sometimes the doors won’t budge and we, as teachers, must try to push them open. We need many strategies up our sleeves to stimulate critical thinking and to transform hearts and minds. Sometimes, the door stays jammed and we must find new ways to open it. Sometimes a door is locked and we must figure out how to find a key to open it safely so we can see what’s on the other side.

Throughout the course, I began to look for doors in the source material and strategies that I was using with the teachers. The door became a powerful framing device and it helped me locate stories with dramatic potential. I discovered strategies for structuring a story’s framework, changing how the light shone on topics under discussion, and screening out what was not relevant in my lessons. I found ways to close doors from time to time so my students could talk about characters and issues in private.

Drama strategies that permitted safe exploration, creation, and representation of ideas became the mainstay of the course. Doors can act as symbols for people who have been treated unjustly. They often provide ways for people to describe the exclusion they have experienced. Using the door metaphor to feel safe as we explored difficult issues pertaining to racism and prejudice became very important. When our students were safely in role, we could examine the injustice depicted in the stories and other source material we were studying with some measure of detachment. The drama teacher's role as the doorkeeper was essential. In adopting this role, we began to make some important decisions about the use of drama to teach anti-racist material. We questioned casting students in the role of the racist or the perpetrator of racism. We felt more comfortable putting students in enabling roles, such as the opponent of racism, the protector of the victim, or the onlooker who has to make decisions about how to behave when confronting racism.

### **The Treasure Chest Project**

What became clear as the "Anti-Racist Education Through Drama" course wound up was that we needed a resource document to bring together all the ideas we had been exploring. Thus began the writing of *The Treasure Chest* document. Teachers, artists, and leaders in education began to write and field test the material that we had been using both within and outside the course. As we gathered more books and ideas, we began to record our work in writing. We used the stories we had selected as a basis of dramatic exploration (Booth, 1994). Many of our lessons were developed in the Drama/Dance Project, a program in which students participated in drama and dance for an eight-day period with a drama facilitator and dancers at the Canadian Children's Dance Theatre. The material that we developed reflected solid equity policy embedded within imaginative drama and dance lessons that could help teachers teach drama and dance while at the same time exploring issues of bullying, inequity, and systemic injustice.

### *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun*

One of the lessons in *The Treasure Chest* presents an archetypal stranger, Lucia Zenteno, the heroine of the bilingual book *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun/La Mujer que brillaba aun mas que el sol* by Alejandro Cruz Martinez. Lucia lives in a community from which she is excluded because of her strangeness and her magical powers. All doors are closed to her. The villagers spy on her day and night and keep their distance from her. They live behind doors of ignorance and mistrust. Eventually, the villagers drive Lucia out of the village. When she leaves, however, the river that sustains the village flows into Lucia's hair and travels with her. The village is left with "only a dry winding riverbed, a serpent of sand where the water had been." This story allows teachers to employ all three metaphors in teaching about equity: the window, the mirror, and the door.

What are the windows in this story? What are Lucia's origins? What kind of society has she tried to enter? Why does her unique beauty and mysterious strength anger and frighten the people with whom she comes in contact? What magical powers does she possess? Why and how does she remain so unbowed and dignified? Who are some real people whose lives remind us of Lucia's? As we

examine the story of Lucia Zenteno, we can discover many things. We can retell her story from the perspective of objects that were left behind in her home in order to achieve a new frame of reference. In one Grade 8 class I taught, a girl held the collar of Lucia's dress and told the story from the point of view of the collar, remembering the "unbearable burden of being close to Lucia" when the protagonist felt excluded and rejected. This student gave voice to her feelings of sadness and fear at Lucia's plight, but she also celebrated Lucia's strength and integrity.

What are the mirrors in this story? When the story is read out loud in Spanish, how do those who speak Spanish as a first language respond? What is the reaction of those listeners who hear the words but do not as yet understand their meaning? What is the response of the Spanish-speaking Guatemalan student who has just arrived in Canada and is invited to read the story out loud to the class? How does she feel when the class spontaneously erupts in applause to express their appreciation of the fluency and power of her oral presentation? What are the teacher's reactions to the comments written by students after working in drama with this story? One Grade 8 student composed the following journal entry in response to the story:

I learned that...

you can be beautiful and have black hair

you can have enormous power and be a woman

you can be fat and still be considered dangerous because of your beauty

you can carry on with your life and make choices even when you are being discriminated against

What doors open up a deeper understanding of this story? If we peer through a metaphorical screen door, can we perceive Lucia's essence? What can we do to prompt students to wonder why Lucia would be treated so badly? How can this story help change readers' attitudes and behavior toward people who suffer persecution and rejection because they are different?

If we explore the story from the inside out and if we return to the place of Lucia's origin and adopt the role of her protectors, what will we discover? What will we learn about her suffering? What will we remember about her past triumphs? What insight into her powers might we gain? What will we begin to understand about our shared humanity?

And when one of the village elders who had exiled Lucia follows her to her place of origin and demands to have the water back, what will we, as Lucia's protectors, say to the elder? How can we teach students that not only Lucia and her tormentors suffer but that everyone in a community suffers when someone is ostracized? Lucia withdraws into exile and seclusion. Lucia's protectors suffer as they witness a member of their community treated cruelly. The villagers suffer from the emotional and spiritual poverty inherent in their detachment from Lucia.