

# The Saddest King:

a primary 'neurodrama'  
(planned with the brain in mind).

Patrice Baldwin

## 10 facts of relevance to drama teachers

- ▶ Human brains are unique – no two brains will ever be the same
- ▶ The brain receives its information through the senses
- ▶ The brain is constantly changing (neuroplasticity) through experiencing and learning new things
- ▶ The brain responds strongly to novelty
- ▶ The brain is highly activated by stories
- ▶ Brains are socially wired and can synchronise with each other (through mirror neurons)
- ▶ The brain learns first through imitation and mimicry and through imagined as well as real experiences
- ▶ There are sensitive periods for learning certain things more easily, e.g. language and certain motor skills
- ▶ Many parts of the brain work together and interconnect when doing almost any task
- ▶ Emotionally charged experiences are more motivating and memorable

**D**rama has its roots in multi-sensory, dramatic, social play, which is spontaneous and prevalent before children come to school. Teachers may then add structure and offer forms and help scaffold imagined experiences for the children in role play corners and in drama lessons. They may use drama strategies to support this. Early years teachers see a shared, imagined world as full of learning opportunities that are developmentally holistic. Drama teachers realise that shared, imagined worlds, structured for learning do not need to diminish as children get older. Brains do not suddenly stop

needing imagined experience or social contexts just because children enter formal education.

Dramatic play points the way to what the brain needs for learning before education intervenes. Children find dramatic play enjoyable and compelling. They engage with imagined worlds for long periods. These imagined experiences link real neurons into new learning pathways and strengthen existing neural pathways. Learning through dramatic play or drama can be emotionally charged, vivid and memorable. The brain also is activated significantly by stories and all Drama is story. Brains

need to interact with each other not just work in solitary ways. They thrive on multi-sensory stimulation and activity rather than just watching and listening. This is true at any age. Good drama teachers plan for and provide what their children need to experience in and through drama. They predict what will work purposefully and analyse and evaluate why their lessons then did or did not go well and what was achieved. There are a myriad of factors that influence what makes a lesson truly outstanding or a shocking flop. Most lessons are somewhere in between. In every lesson, teachers have quite a challenge! They are dealing with a class of about 30 children, all with different brains, experiences, attitudes and abilities and they all need to make progress.



Clearly any teacher should be interested in how brains work. They will benefit from knowing, and not only intuiting, what grabs and keeps the attention of children. Drama teachers should surely be fascinated to know a little about how and why Drama works neurologically. Many drama teachers produce great lessons at a highly intuitive level; but, nonetheless, there will be scientific reasons that underpin why a drama lesson works. The more we know about what works, the more it can help us shape or fine tune our practice. Also, to be blunt, I don't think it's good enough for professionals to just speak emotively about their lessons; to just say only, 'The children really enjoyed it!' Enjoyment is very important. It is why many children play dramatically for hours on end and why later they want Drama; but what is it about drama that is unique and makes it so necessary in schools? We are required increasingly to make a strong case for it is important for us to be having drama teaching in schools and able to analyse, articulate and

advocate for this. Drama's efficacy for enabling and improving learning needs to be understood by teachers, headteachers and by policy makers.

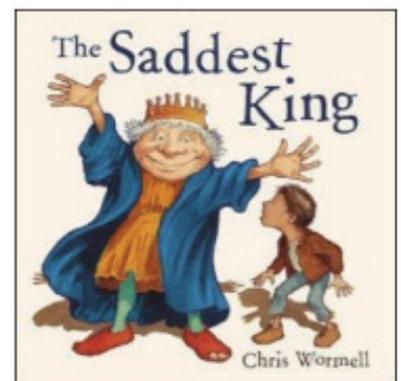
### A lesson

What follows is a drama lesson for primary children. It was written with the brain in mind. Good drama teachers won't just follow this lesson like a recipe; they will adapt any documented lesson to suit the specific needs, skills and abilities of the children in their own classes. Good teachers take account of the actual responses of the learners during the lesson and adapt the lesson in advance and most importantly 'in the moment' to take account of the child's knowledge, skills and understanding and to maximise the learning. I don't suggest you confine this lesson for use with a particular age group. I have used this picture book story as a resource with 5 year olds and also with adults. It is what you do with it that matters. I am offering this primary drama lesson to you for the following reasons:

- I know this lesson has worked well for me and I believe in us sharing our practice;
- I want to clarify my own thinking about my own practice and writing commits me to this;
- I want teachers to reflect on their own drama practice in relation to how the brain learns best and this article hopefully offers an example.

You can pick up any lens to analyse and comment on any lesson. The same drama lesson can be looked at in many ways; for example, what types of thinking are being required of the children in this lesson? What types of speech are being developed? How are the activities helping or hindering various group dynamics? and so on. This lesson will be annotated by mainly picking up a 'neuro-lens', in an attempt to link the cognitive and the affective.

You do not have to have the picture book of *The Saddest King* to do this lesson, although it may be preferable. Do not tell the children the full story in advance, as this will make it more likely that they will simply re-enact the story that they will then know; better for them to have a sense of wonder as they work together through drama, with the teacher and a story that they do not know.



This drama lesson is based on **The Saddest King** a picture book by *Chris Wormell*.  
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## STORY OUTLINE

In this country, everyone appears to be happy all the time. This is because the king has decreed that it is against the law not to be happy. This leads inevitably to inner tensions for the citizens, as no-one feels happy all the time and not being able to express various emotions is stressful. One day a little boy cries in front of the statue of the king. Everyone tries to stop him crying in various ways but he is soon arrested by the king's guards and taken to the palace. The boy meets the king, who looks very happy. The king asks why he is crying. The boy explains his dog has died. Strange sounds emanate from the king. The boy looks closely and realises the king is wearing a mask. The boy pulls away the king's happy mask and reveals the saddest face the boy has ever seen. The king's dog had also died and the boy and king reminisce together, laughing and crying, as they share dog stories. The king explains that when his own dog died no-one dared laugh or smile in his presence. That was why he made happiness compulsory. The boy explains that you need to show what you feel and the king realises his folly and rips up the legal document. Then everyone immediately enjoys a really good cry.

### STRATEGY, CONVENTION, FORM

### TEACHER GUIDANCE

### COMMENT

#### 1 Movement/still image

Ask the children to move around the room and freeze into a statue that depicts the emotion you call out, e.g. sadness, fear, suspicion, love, hate, loneliness, grief, guilt, nervousness, anger, etc. Finish with a 'happiness' statue. You could point out that on any day, we probably feel and show a wide range of emotions. You can ask them what they notice about the differences in their bodies when they are depicting happiness or sadness.

This kinaesthetic, visual and affectively linked activity, focuses the children's attention on expressing (and maybe feeling) a range of emotions. They will be drawing on personal, emotional and physical memories. This activity prepares them to link personally with a key theme in the story. It also brings in the idea of a statue depicting great happiness (an aspect of the story they have yet to discover).

#### 2a Physical theatre/physical mapping

Tell the children that the drama will be set in a town long ago. There are no vehicles, machines or mobile phones. They will create that town. Give the children an opportunity to each become an object or building that is part of the town where this drama is set, for example, a bench, the baker's shop, the church. In turn they can enter the space and, in role, say what they are representing and give a little information, for example, 'I am a bench in the market place. People sit on me and laugh together when they are tired.' If you have the picture book you could use the pictures as a visual stimulus for this activity.

Young children often think inanimate objects are alive, for example, they draw the sun as a face.

This drama activity enables the children to become and embody the setting, to share creative ownership of it. It makes the setting be memorable and gives them a personal stake in it. The setting can literally be re-membered (recreated by the members of the body) later, by the children later, if required.

#### 2b Teacher in role

Once some children have entered the space and created some parts of the setting, you can enter last, and say, 'I am the big statue of our beloved King. We all love the king. His face is always happy.'

The teacher in role gives status to the activity and uses the role to feed in and focus the children's attention on a key piece of information. Again, there is a recurrence of the happy statue depicted in activity 1. The more something is repeated, the more easily it is remembered. The more ways it is experienced and tagged in the memory, for example, visually, auditorily, physically, the more easily a memory is recalled.

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2c Map making	Activity 2 could be done as a map making activity, with the objects drawn and labelled on a big pictorial map.	A map provides a visual representation and organiser, a reminder of the setting that could be added to later. Some children have difficulty with imagining and visualisation, so seeing something real, such as a map, can help them imagine the setting.
3 Teacher in role	<p>Explain to the children that you will imagine yourself to be the king. They will be his very clever advisers and must address you as, 'Your majesty'. Wear a crown and cloak if you like!</p> <p>In role, tell them that you have decided to make a new law, that everyone in the land must be happy all the time. Listen formally to their responses and encourage them to explain, reason and justify their comments and advice. You will ignore their advice and will make the law anyway. You could ask them to draft the legal document as a writing activity.</p>	<p>Teacher in role develops from adults naturally playing alongside children when they are engaged in dramatic role play. Telling the children they are 'clever advisers' raises self esteem, expectation and self belief. Teachers can respect and challenge the 'adviser' thinking of the children from within a fiction. Self and supported belief in their assumed capabilities as 'advisers' can raise the children's actual performance levels. They are rehearsing being confident, clever and competent adults.</p> <p>For the teacher, signing your role as king, with a piece of costume makes it clearer when you are in or out of role.</p>
4 Rumours (whole class)	<p>Ask the children to change roles. They will now become the townspeople. They have heard a rumour that there is to be a new law and are walking around and gossiping in the market place. Give time for them to spread and gather rumours and gossip. You can join in. Is the king mad? What happens if someone you love dies? Is it possible to be happy all the time?</p>	<p>This informal gossiping in role is a deliberate contrast to activity 2. It enables the children to loosen up in role and say what they think in a more flowing and natural way. They are less individually 'on the spot', will relax more and this is likely to be enabling. This activity will help them to generate and gather thoughts and ideas from each other in role at speed. It also reveals their thinking and understanding of the key issues and problems, so the teacher can use this information in or out of the drama.</p>
5a Small group playmaking	<p>What difficulty does this new law create to people's lives? Ask the children in groups of 4 to create a short scene of up to a minute. Give a clear deadline for completion of the task.</p> <p>The group scene should portray some situation where it is very difficult for the townsfolk to appear happy but they manage it by positive reframing, for example, someone is ill but saying how lucky they are to be so warm!</p>	<p>Group work will be more enabling for some children than for others, maybe depending on their social abilities. Groups larger than 4 are more difficult dynamically. Stay alert to individuals and combinations in some groups that can prevent collaboration and negotiation, for example, the dominant leader who has to rule or the child who does not contribute. Children may need to be told what constitutes 'good group work', for example, listening to everyone's ideas, negotiating, and so on. A strict time usually increases concentration and focus, raises the tension level and speeds up the devising process.</p>

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<p>5b Performance carousel (in groups)</p> <p>Eavesdropping teacher in role)</p>	<p>Explain that all scenes will be performed in turn without a break between groups. They should use slow motion to move into an opening still image that they hold for a few seconds. Each group in turn performs the short scene and ends by freezing into a final still image before melting to the ground. Music could be played as a background soundtrack.</p> <p>You could spy on the scenes as one of the king's guards, checking townsfolk do not break the law.</p>	<p>This activity gives a sense of belonging. The activity only works if everyone co-operates. Each individual child is important to the success of the whole. It requires them to all pay great attention to each other and pick up on verbal and non verbal cues. The collective success can bond the group. They are each others' audience and part of a shared, imagined community with shared knowledge. They have a real shared responsibility to make the performance work.</p> <p>Soundtrack music will tag the scenes in the memory and help build atmosphere. The teacher in role as spy adds constructive tension and provides a possible eye witness.</p>
<p>6 Improvisation (in pairs)</p>	<p>The townsfolk can confide their true feelings and thoughts secretly to close friends and/or family. Ask the children to get into pairs. They are going to improvise in role together in secret as townsfolk. Again, you could be a guard moving around and they can whisper to each other only when your back is turned.</p>	<p>The imagined secrecy will stimulate excitement and dramatic tension. It re-evokes past emotions associated with confiding secrets.</p> <p>Talking only when the guard's back is turned, is reminiscent of games such as, 'What's the time Mr Wolf?' This means that the children will experience a sense of danger but know they are safe, as this is make believe. They are drawing on their memory and knowledge of past games they've enjoyed</p>
<p>7 Eavesdropping</p>	<p>Afterwards, a snippet of each pair's secret conversation can be overheard by all. The teacher can pass each by as a signal that it is their turn to be heard.</p>	<p>When snippets of improvised conversation are repeated and overheard, the children have already rehearsed what they will now say and so are more confident than being listened to whilst improvising.</p>
<p>8 Tableau</p>	<p>Tell them that the king commissions a big statue to be created in the park. It is intended to make the people feel 'even happier' when they look at it. The children stand in a class circle and have opportunity to enter individually and add themselves to create one collective statue called, 'Happiness'.</p> <p>They could suggest possible subtitles for a statue plaque, for example, 'Never be sad here'</p>	<p>This activity requires the children to pay good attention to each others' contributions in order to fit well with the growing sculpture. This activity is physical, emotional, cognitive, visual, collaborative, symbolic and aesthetic. It employs creative and critical thinking. It also gives a sense of belonging and interdependence. It links back to activity 1 and sustains the focus on the king and representations of happiness.</p>
<p>9 Movement or Dance Drama</p>	<p>The situation creates bad dreams for the people. The King can't control their dreams. In new groups of 4 the children create a short, dream/nightmare about the situation. for example, not being able to smile. Each group can show the dream twice (as bad dreams often are repeated).</p>	<p>Devising dreams provides opportunity for discussing and using symbolism. This will encourage them to draw upon personal experiences of dreams and nightmares and their experiences of different states of consciousness. Often children work mainly naturalistically in drama but this</p>

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	<p>More simply, they could just create a group still image from a dream.</p> <p>Groups in turn can present the dreams through a flowing, performance carousel (see activity 5). A soundtrack could be used in the background or music offered as a stimulus to work with.</p>	<p>activity encourages more diverse forms of representation and is likely to involve movement to represent ideas.</p> <p>The use of music can add an extra dimension, enabling the association in the memory, of emotion, movement and sound. Background music will make the links less explicit than actually planning movement to music. Nonetheless, the brain links the sounds, emotions, symbols and movements and the music can later be used alone to re-evolve the emotions tagged in the memory.</p>
<p>10 Teacher in role</p>	<p>Explain that you be in role as a child and they will all be townsfolk outdoors, going about some daily business. Ask them to decide what they are doing and get into a still picture depicting this, for example, sweeping the street, shopping, chatting, and so on. Tell them you are standing by a statue of the king. You signal for the picture to come to life, then, as a child, you cry loudly and inconsolably! You are breaking the law and this is giving them a problem to solve together.</p>	<p>The improvisation gives them time to 'inter-think and try to solve the problem together. The role of the teacher is mixed status, that is, high status as the centre of community attention but low status as you are a child. The children are in the novel position of being adults trying to help the teacher as child. They are given opportunity to behave responsibly and caringly together. This is being modelled by children for those children in the class who are less empathetic and/or less community minded. The situation is fictional but the problem solving practice is real and so, probably, is the empathy. Some children lack empathy and some neuroscientists believe these children have faulty mirror neurons. Modelling empathy can help them to imitate and mimic it for more social success (Simon Baron Cohen).</p>
<p>11</p>	<p>Freeze the scene and change to the role of 'teacher as storyteller', Story-tell the episode that has just been improvised, for example, 'The people heard the child crying. They were worried that the king's guards would hear him and lock him up in the palace...' Feedback as narrative the ideas that the children came up with in activity 10. Story-tell forward to the point where the guards arrive, for example, 'Eventually, as the people had feared, the kings' guards arrived and the crying child was arrested and taken away'.</p>	<p>The teacher is modelling narrative storytelling. Children nowadays are apparently less accomplished at narratives. The brain responds easily to story. The children co-own the content so it has personal relevance. The storytelling by the teacher demonstrates that the children's ideas are valued and have been listened to. Activity 11 helps the children reflect on the scene they actively generated together with the teacher, during activity 10. Reflectivity helps the brain make sense of and store the active experience.</p> <p>The teacher as narrator is able to select and focus the attention of the children and move the drama back or forwards in time, as well as hold it still for reflection.</p>
<p>12 Collective role Teacher in role</p>	<p>Tell the children that you will be in role as the king and that they will all be the child. Select a rule about speaking, for example,</p>	<p>Collective role gives a strong sense of unity and belonging. The children need to follow an imposed rule about</p>

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<p>Improvisation</p> <p>Ritual</p>	<p>a) anyone (as the child) may speak to the king but no-one can speak twice in a row or b) each child can only speak once to the king c) or a 'speaking object' can be passed around and only the holder of the object can speak.</p> <p>As the happy looking king ask the child why he has broken the law. Try to find out what has made him cry. In the book, the child's dog has died and that is why he is crying but the children can offer other reasons. At some point turn your back on the children and sob. When you face them you are smiling again. Whenever you turn away you are heard crying. You can step out of role and ask the children what they think is happening. Key moment: Cover your face with your hands and enact removing a happy mask to reveal the true and sad face of the king. You could put the imaginary, happy mask on and off to make it clear that your happy face is just a mask.</p>	<p>speaking and listen carefully to each other in order to come across as one character.</p> <p>The teacher is deliberately creating confusion in the minds of the children. Their brains will want to resolve ambiguity. Why is the king looking happy but also crying?</p>
<p>13 Thought tracking</p>	<p>Freeze the scene and, out of role, ask the children what they are thinking at the moment they realise the king has been wearing a mask, for example, the king has been tricking us, and so on. You could facilitate a discussion about the implications and possible consequences of this revelation.</p>	<p>The king will probably stimulate a strong, spontaneous emotional and verbal response from the children, when they realise they have been tricked by his happy mask. The thought tracking holds back spontaneous speech long enough to enable considered responses. The injustice and dishonesty of the king, who is not following his own law, is likely to provoke an emotional response that the children can then be asked to explain and justify.</p>
<p>14 Small group playmaking</p> <p>Performance carousel</p>	<p>What happens next? In the book, the king, guided by the child, realises he has been foolish and changes the law back. People can now feel what they wish. The children can create and present their own short scenes that offer a range of alternative endings for this story. These can be shown using a performance carousel. Or, the children can just talk about possible endings before being told the rest of the story by the teacher.</p>	<p>Whilst the children do not know the actual story ending, their minds will wonder about it and think creatively. The drama gives form for sharing and presenting their original ideas for the possible story ending.</p> <p>Enacting some possible endings is likely to be more satisfying than just talking about them. It will also make the ending more memorable and personally relevant.</p>



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