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Editorial

Sometimes we might wish for the world to come with a trigger warning. Something to give us advance notice of upsetting or disturbing things so we can avoid our own distress and keep the fear at bay. Protect ourselves. This is understandable, this wish to walk away and bury the panic threatening to overwhelm us. It gives us the impression that we have some control, like a choice that we have - that some of us have.

One of the many distressing things taking place now is in UK schools where there is rising concern around the mental health of our young.

Despite welcome additional funding in 2021, mental health trusts continue to face challenges around the workforce, including retention of mental health nurses, long-term sustainable funding, and a lack of social care provision for children and young people... Just shy of half a million children and young people in England are currently on mental health waiting lists, 85% higher than before the pandemic, and latest prevalence data shows about 1 in 5 children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023, up from one in six in 2021, and one in nine in 2017. Children and young people's urgent referrals to crisis teams are now almost three times higher than prior to the pandemic.¹

Although the appearance of these disorders may vary in their particulars that they are widespread is inescapable. Widespread disorders are a response to widespread causes. Our young are affected en masse, and they are demonstrating that there is something very wrong, through their illnesses, almost as if they were one body. The pandemic is frequently referred to as one cause of this, and it certainly exacerbated the ills, not least because it made tangible the impact of the government's austerity measures on the National Health Service. Yet, as we have seen, there was already concern in 2017, i.e. before the pandemic. One only has to trawl back through the years preceding 2017 to read of some of the widespread factors that might be disturbing our young, threatening their sense of security, of being at home in the world. Societal shifts, political infighting, scandals, climate change, austerity measures, fake news and a biased media, and an exclusionary and disempowering curriculum, boundaried by an examination system designed to channel young people's voices and thoughts along highly prescribed lines, all bringing uncertainty and fear of the future, all redolent of negligence. Put simply, the needs of the young are not being met, they are not being enabled to feel at home in the world. And whilst individual treatments are needed for individual sufferers, it's the prevalent conditions that need addressing. Otherwise are we not simply making individuals better so that they can once more try to endure that which has already done them harm?

¹ [nhs-providers-briefing-westminster-hall-childrens-mental-health-week-2024.pdf](https://www.nhsproviders.org/briefing-westminster-hall-childrens-mental-health-week-2024.pdf)
([nhsproviders.org](https://www.nhsproviders.org))

It is not as if we couldn't have seen it coming. We know that the UK government has deliberately and openly cut the services that are needed by us all, including the young and the vulnerable. We know that the wealth gap between the rich and the poor has grown. We know that we have been lied to, misinformed by the media and distracted by political red herrings. With this knowing comes a loss of confidence, at the very least; it reveals the belief system within which the UK operates, based on the reduction of government spending, deregulation and the promotion of free-market capitalism, and has done so for the last fourteen years years (at least). So why haven't we taken it in? Is it just too distressing and overwhelming? Are we turning our backs?

Children's Mental Health Week took place from 5-11 February 2024. Its theme was 'My Voice Matters' and its aim was a

...mental health awareness week that empowers, equips and gives a voice to all children and young people in the UK.²

Throughout this issue of *The Journal for Drama in Education* you will find practitioners from across the globe, from an internationalist perspective, seeking to enable young people to find and give voice, and who look directly at what is happening and what needs to be done. We need a different kind of trigger warning, one that warns us not to look away, that helps us understand that every time we turn our backs we diminish our own chance of survival.

In his *Chair's Report*, Matthew Milburn contextualises the current paucity of education today in the UK through the appalling case of the murder of Brianna Ghey. He is in no doubt that the education system contributed to the tragedy of the three young people involved in the murder. He is scathing of a headteacher who claims that there is no low-level disruption in his school. And he is mindful of the impact that social media and 'influencers' have on everybody and young people in particular. He offers chinks of light – hope from the work that National Drama is currently undertaking and the work that NATD is sharing across the country. He is very clear about the education system that we need:

In my view, we must argue for a more human world in which young people are able to express themselves, able to reflect on what they think, how they feel, and make sense of who they really are. There is a crisis going on under our noses, we must move away from our obsession with measuring academic attainment and progress and shift the focus on to human development.

In *The Grit – Catching the Mantle*, Maggie Hulson, Raja' Farah, Annamarie Bayley and Mutasem Atrash share an astonishing account of a piece of work that straddles the latest horror to emerge from the Middle East. Farah and Bayley were funded by

² [Children's Mental Health Week \(childrensmentalhealthweek.org.uk\)](https://childrensmentalhealthweek.org.uk)

NATD³ and Atrash by The A.M. Qattan Foundation to attend the most recent *Dorothy Heathcote Now* Conference in Aberdeen, Scotland. The struggles of Farah and Atrash to get there in the first place were almost insurmountable. But on their second day, Hamas attacked Israel and our Palestinian guests were torn apart with fear and grief. Their return was fraught with danger and tension and their living conditions now are constantly compromised. And yet, they collaborated with Hulson and Bayley, not only to describe their experiences but to create new work.

Creativity, resilience, life, all were deeply challenged by the prevailing brutality and intimidation. Challenged, but not crushed.

In Fatah's words:

We were thinking loudly and freely together. We could listen to and reflect on each other's ideas, ask and wonder about them. Our discussions led to a variety of inspiring thoughts. We built on them and rethought many times about the possibilities. Every meeting we came with new questions to think about.

In a very moving account, in which he places a rich understanding of the context of their lives, Atrash identifies what he is doing, why he is doing it and what he wants to do. Crucially, it is collaborating through his Drama practice with teachers around the world that inspires him.

As a Palestinian teacher, I found in the drama approach and the mantle of the expert a space for the values of justice, humanity and freedom. This is because of its critical emancipatory vision, and the work to develop my liberation practice through work and partnership with colleagues in the United Kingdom and the world.

This is a very important piece of work that serves as an inspiration to us all.

In *Towards a Free(er) Subject*, David Davis shares his latest thinking around being in role and the crucial role it could play in freeing both the individual and generations of young people. It is a very powerful piece and a compelling read, written in Davis' urgent and incisive style:

My purpose here is to focus on what I consider the key question of the moment for drama teachers: how can we use our drama work to light up that area of human subjectivity and human agency? How can the developing young human come to act positively for a human future?

He describes our response to the Libyan disaster when a poorly-maintained dam burst and 25,000 people died:

The day after being 'shocked' by the news we carry on from day to

³ Funding for Farah came from the Tony Grady Fund and for Bayley from the Mary Simpson Fund. Details of both can be found in the back pages of this Issue.

day as we did before. How is this possible? I am going to suggest a different sort of shock is needed.

He takes us on a journey through Lacan, a disagreement with Rousseau, the neuroscience of Catherine Malabou and the work of Gavin Bolton. And he concludes with a powerful analysis that (coincidentally) Mutasem Atrash wrote for him several years ago. He describes his experience of being in role, of metaxis:

The trauma I experienced opened my eyes to the many violations that occur in the world in the name of the law. It was a moment like the fog was lifted.

Davis concludes:

I am conjecturing that the example Mutasem speaks about might contain some of these components needed to ‘change our minds’, to change neuronal structures: the social in the personal; connection with real personal/social concerns; the engagement of strong feelings/emotions; while living through a drama experience in a *metaxis* state; a shock where imagination is stimulated. Here stimulated in the sense of ‘Oh my god! What is happening here?’ These I am arguing are the areas we need to explore in our work in drama with young people in an epoch of existential crisis for humanity. We need our drama and we need to take ownership of our brains.

As always, he is asking the most challenging of questions about the very existence of our species and the role that we must play in creating a humanised world.

As regular readers will know, on Saturday and Sunday, the 9th and 10th March 2019, Drama practitioners from around the world gathered at Trinity College, Dublin for a conference: Who Am I? Who Can Tell Me Who I Am? All the contributors had worked with David Davis over many years and had been invited by Carmel O’Sullivan (Professor in Education in the School of Education) to deliver a paper to mark his eightieth birthday. Five years ago we planned an issue marking and celebrating the work of Drama pedagogue, David Davis. Two years we published the first of the articles to emerge from the Dublin Conference. The first of the articles published in this Issue is the paper presented by Cao Xi while the second by Li Yingning. While Davis was at the heart of the conference, the aim was to enable a range of voices to discuss their own practices in drama and theatre education in relation to how they engage with the social/political in drama and theatre education.

The two pieces are inter-related, centred on the Drama Rainbow education centre in Beijing. In *‘I disagree’—live through again, and again*, Cao Xi focuses his thinking on a fascinating piece of work exploring ways in which ‘living-through’ Drama can be applied to the creation and performance of theatre to a live audience. His description of the tension felt in the dress rehearsal when the ensemble turns against the central character (“I disagree.”) is chilling and illuminating by equal turn. But this is not

simply an experimental theatre form, it is also a deeply significant form of learning in an education system that is, to use the current euphemism in the UK, knowledge-rich. That is to say, a straightjacket of rote learning.

The children and young people we work with live in a very complex social, political and cultural context, but this is not unique to China, and the rapidly changing world we all live in requires us to pay serious and urgent attention to what kind of drama can prepare young people to face the complicated realities and extreme unknowns of the future? How to navigate their responsibility over a deteriorating social, ecological and cultural environment?

In his reflection, some five years on from the experience, Cao Xi speaks of *tang ping*, literally meaning 'lying flat.' He hopes that,

...this widely criticised phenomenon is, in fact, a form of resistance against an outdated education system, calling for a necessary transformation to meet the evolving needs of a generation grappling with significant challenges in their lifetime.

In, *Introducing Drama in Education to Mainland China*, Yi Lingning sets out her key role in transforming education in China. This includes her involvement in setting up Rainbow Drama but so much more. Those of us who practice in the UK will note remarkable similarities in the struggle she describes. In her original article she spoke of her desire to see,

The new generation of Chinese youth will break the shamefulness of the label 'made in China'. They are moving towards 'created in China'. But they can only achieve this by being given enough space for them to take shared ownership and responsibility for their own learning and lives.

But this was no idealistic wish. In her update, written for this Issue, she reports that Drama and Education and Theatre in Education have both been incorporated into the national standards. She is very clear that there is much work still to be done and that the devil is in the detail. But she is also very clear about the potential that is beginning to be realised:

To me, when drama is useful in education, it must allow children and young people to create and reflect themselves in the fiction. It's the degree of ownership that differs in these two approaches, not nationalities, cultures or ideologies. To me, what I have learned from Davis and other great leaders in the field, is not just a way of seeing drama as an art form, it's a way of letting children and young people own themselves. This is vital in modern China.

News

The two pieces by Tim Taylor and Kostas Amoiropoulos bring us news of two recently

formed pioneering groups, both evolved from a network and shared history of like-minded teachers and scholars committed to the sharing of practice.

In *Site B: Seeking a contemporary approach for drama* Kostas Amoiropoulos writes
The most essential and consequential of such questions is how to practise drama so that it might initiate change within our current social reality.

Amoiropoulos recounts the genesis of the Site B group, grown organically from a commonality of stance, perspective, skill, experience and a fine perception of how the world is currently working, or rather not working, in the interest of humans. The influence of David Davis is affirmed:

Art in this epoch must be focused on enabling the audience, spectator, reader, participant to glimpse the 'real' self-situation: the way in which every daily event is shaped in some way by these large forces. (Davis, 2014, p.22)

And Amoiropoulos places a timely recognition of the work of two drama giants. These are the playwright and dramaturg Edward Bond and the drama practitioner and scholar Gavin Bolton, both of whom have been indefatigable in exploring how drama can make change possible. Amoiropoulos outlines the ways in which the site B group is developing a significant dialectic between the work of the two and explains the thinking behind the name of the group Site B, that is to say, Bond's theoretical analyses of the working of theatre/drama. The Site B group researches the practical implications of the interaction between the work of Bolton and Bond, at the same time scrutinising other theoretical work from discipline in and beyond drama.

Amoiropoulos concludes by describing how this work has been communicated to scholars and practitioners worldwide, and outlines their plans for future communication, raising questions for us all:

How do we create drama that places participants in a living through situation which simultaneously holds in view the social world and the individual? How do we reopen the gap of meaning for the participants to change and recreate themselves and their world? How can imagination and reason be reunified in drama?

In *Mantle of the Expert Network for Advanced Practitioners*, Tim Taylor describes how his collaboration with Viv Aitken evolved and took shape against wild seas, in the wake of a successful joint tour around schools in New Zealand.

Wherever we went and whoever we met, we found teachers and educators fascinated by Dramatic Inquiry and enthusiastic to make it work. "Wouldn't it be great," we agreed, "if we could find a way to bring these people together?"

At a time when Mantle of the Expert is

...thriving in teaching communities all over the world...

this online group brings together teachers, practitioners and academics from around the world to discuss papers prepared in advance, as well as to support each other in to applying the models and concepts to their practice.

Reviews

We are pleased to include two book reviews by experienced practitioners well regarded in their fields. It is interesting to note that each of the reviewers recognises the importance of the co-constructivist approaches advocated within the books they have separately and individually reviewed.

Try This... Unlocking Learning with Imagination by Tim Taylor & Viv Aitken. In this review, Richard Kieran advises us just how excellent an inductive model this book is for teachers wanting to develop Mantle of the Expert pedagogy to deepen their teaching of the curriculum. He warmly welcomes the accessibility, thoroughness, sensitivity and practical applicability of a brilliant book that is the product of what happens when,
...great minds collide to give us a hand with our classroom practice.

He notes the careful structuring of the work to ensure that it presents appropriate challenge and admires the way in which the book unlocks,
curriculum opportunities in both countries.....Listening to Taylor and Aitken talk about the responsibility of respecting the culture of indigenous peoples and places adds a real layer of sensitivity to this work and the keys unlock this. Aitken describes this as cultural competency and culturally sustaining practice.

Kieran is the head teacher of Woodrow First School, a Mantle of the Expert Training School and is well-placed to recommend that this book should be,
in classrooms, staffrooms, and ITT libraries because Taylor and Aitken have done some canny demystifying around dramatic inquiry.

Drama at the Heart of English (2024) by Theo Bryer, Maggie Pitfield and Jane Coles. Lyndsay Muir's review encourages us to see clearly that this is,
...an immensely important and valuable publication.

She goes on to show how the book provides an historical perspective and knowledgeable application of theory, as it places the case for siting Drama well within the English curriculum. She notes a judicious grasp of what is needed, and values the chapter on Shakespeare which positions,
...learners in an active, rather than passive relationship to these canonical texts, can create what the authors describe as an inclusive and culturally responsive 'active Shakespeare' – one that is alive and socially situated.

Muir observes that this is all viewed with rigour from a position based on experience and an,

... 'innerstanding' ... a hallmark of classroom drama.

As subject specialist lead for an Initial Teacher Education course in drama, Muir has had no hesitation in placing this book on the required reading list, as

... a significant body of work and a vital gift in the evolution of our Drama (and English!) teachers' professional knowledge and pedagogy.

Chairs report February 2024

by Matthew Milburn

The case of Brianna Ghey, the 16 year old brutally murdered by two teenagers in a park has left many of us shocked and deeply upset. A particular event, that reveals the universal crisis that is going on in the lives of many young people. Influenced by the dark web, by social media and let down by the schooling system, Scarlett Jenkinson and Eddie Ratcliffe planned Brianna's murder and even wrote down a detailed plan prior to the event. They prepared in advance, bringing the knife to the scene before stabbing her 28 times. Yet young people are not born with such a negative view of human life. They learn through relationships, experience and from the prevailing culture. It was no surprise to me that Scarlett, the driving force behind the murder, had been excluded from a school that failed to disclose the full details of her behaviour.⁴

I currently work closely with 14 headteachers across the country and I know that there are serious behaviour issues in many schools. Exclusions are high, Pupil Referral Units are full and many teachers are leaving the profession as they feel unable to teach. One reaction to this behaviour crisis has been to implement extreme behaviour policies that are draconian and that seek to suppress all negative behaviours.⁵ It is common in secondary schools for children to be sat in rows. It is common to not allow group work. Some schools do not allow children to talk in class. It is reminiscent of a Victorian era when children are seen but not heard. I watched a video clip last week in which Headteacher boasted that there was "no low-level disruption" at his school, made up of 2000 children.

In my view, we must argue for a more human world in which young people are able to express themselves, able to reflect on what they think, how they feel, and make sense of who they really are. There is a crisis going on under our noses, we must move away from our obsession with measuring academic attainment and progress and shift the focus on to human development.

Having been a secondary school Headteacher for 17 years, I appreciate, it's not easy. Schools don't operate in isolation. Children come to school for seven hours a day, having spent much of their lives online. Teenagers look up to influencers like Andrew Tate and hold them in high regard. For some reason, the values espoused by Kim Kardashian are more likely to hold sway when set against those promoted by the school Head.

¹ The Independent Friday 2nd February 2024 "Brianna Ghey's killer's new school was not told she had drugged another pupil" Jane Dalton

² Prospect.org.uk "School punishment systems should be put under the microscope"
Warwick Mansell · 8 November 2023

NATD has always stood for a child centred humanising curriculum with an internationalist perspective. We stand for listening to children and building a curriculum based on what the child needs, not just on what adult society wants. This changes the role of the teacher from being the font of all knowledge to being someone who can build learning experiences from what the children offer. What we argue for is totally at odds with the knowledge rich curriculum model that was advocated by Michael Gove when he was Minister for Education and which has become the orthodoxy in recent years. There is too much content in the current curriculum and not enough room for children to find their own voice and explore their own interests.

Thanks to the excellent work of Geoff Redman and National Drama, there are some chinks of light. The House of Lords Report, “Requires Improvement, Urgent Change for 11-16 Education” provides a damning indictment of the current situation in secondary schools.

Our conclusions recognise that the 11–16 curriculum must be revised to incorporate a greater emphasis on technical, digital and creative areas of study. We are convinced that the burden of GCSE assessment on pupils and teachers should also be eased, by reconsidering the quantity of content studied and the number of subjects assessed externally. This approach is supported by our range of recommendations.⁶

It is an 82 page report that recommends amongst other things, the “abandonment” of the E-Bacc as a performance measure, a wider range of study at KS3 and KS4, and greater opportunities for oracy in KS3. One section of the summary relates to the arts specifically:

19. Pupils must have genuine, substantive opportunities to study creative and artistic subjects at key stages 3 and 4. This is vital to enable them to develop creative skills and to support a diverse talent pipeline for our creative industries, which are a key sector of the UK economy, and the many other businesses that are crying out for creative skills. We have heard that the delivery of these opportunities is increasingly difficult in the current context due to funding constraints and the deprioritisation of creative subjects due to accountability measures. (Paragraph 127)

20. A principal aim of future adjustments to key stage 4 school accountability measures, including those called for in this report, should be to reverse the impact of the current measures on the take-up of

⁶ House Of Lords Education for 11–16 Year Olds Committee Report of Session 2023–24

Requires improvement: urgent change for 11–16 education

creative subjects at GCSE. (Paragraph 128)

Many on the NATD Executive were totally underwhelmed when I shared this latest report from Westminster. I fully understand their scepticism. This is a report from the Lords not the Commons. It calls for tweaks to the existing system not a fundamental shift. NATD has for many years stood in opposition to the National Curriculum and the league tables that are so damaging to the culture of our system. What I do think we should recognise is that Geoff Redman and National Drama have had their voice heard and the tone of the report is deeply critical of the current situation in 11-16 schools. We should acknowledge that we are not alone in arguing for a more child centred and human approach to learning.

What we should also do is offer an alternative, be it child and family centred modes of assessment or pedagogy and curriculum models that encourage active learning and deep understanding. I'm delighted that Ellen Green has recently run a successful workshop based on the play of "Animal Farm" at the Bolton Octagon. We also have further set text workshops planned for later in the year in London and Horsham. Please keep an eye on the website for more details.

The NEC is also planning to work closely with colleagues in the drama research group Site B, who have been meeting on line in recent months. The group is made up of colleagues who have been trained by, or collaborated with, David Davis. With his encouragement, we aim to organise a conference at which participants can explore further the work of Gavin Bolton.

I'd like to thank the NEC for the hard work that collectively they put in to keeping our Association running. I know that many people really value this Journal so brilliantly curated by Maggie Hulson and Guy Williams. The NEC plan to meet in person in March to review our policy document, plan for our AGM and plan for the conference mentioned above. We would welcome new members and in particular the involvement of colleagues who work in schools. In these challenging times, we take strength from working together; being involved with NATD should mean that