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Towards a problem-posing pedagogy: Using teacher-in-role in a special needs classroom

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Background: Teacher-in-role (t-i-r) drama method is explored as a pedagogical approach that can transform special needs curricula in South Africa.

Aim: To use t-i-r to create a collaborative educational environment between learners and teachers. This article drew on Paulo Freire's problem-posing pedagogy as a framework that encourages critical thinking and engagement.

Setting: The study took place in the Skills Phase classroom, which handles school-to-workplace transitions at a local special school in a small town.

Methods: This practice-led research study reflects on the uses of Dorothy Heathcote's teacher-in-role to extend the curriculum beyond the Foundation Phase (Grade 3) level. The lessons involved a series of practical cross-curricular drama lessons that integrated topics from the Life Orientation (Grade 10–12) and the Drama (Creative Arts Grade 7–9) curriculum. The topics encouraged better linkages to work environment capabilities such as communication and problem-solving.

Results: The findings revealed that combining drama-based pedagogy with Freire's problem-posing pedagogy can help learners become decision-makers and problem-solvers in the classroom. As a result, the learners improved their critical thinking skills, self-esteem and confidence.

Conclusion: The paper showed how drama-based pedagogy within a South African context of learning disability is an area that remains untapped, thus advocating for the uses of this approach as a possibility in improving special needs curricular implementation and practice.

Contribution: The research provided insight into the care and education of special needs learners. Thus, it contributes to the growing academic literature on Drama-in-education (D-i-E) and inclusion in special needs schools in drama practices in South Africa.

Keywords: drama in education; learning disability; cross-curriculum; educational access; disability arts; teacher-in-role; problem posing; pedagogy.

Introduction

This paper comes from my Master of Arts research project on how drama activities can serve as tools for teaching and learning in a special needs classroom. My MA coursework practical was a practice-led project with learners in the Skills Phase class at a local special school in a small town. According to Nelson (2013:9), practice-led research methodology investigates practical ways of knowing by doing. I positioned myself as a teaching artist because I am a qualified Foundation Phase teacher and an applied theatre practitioner (Hellemann 2017:9). The two professions aided my quest to find practical ways of knowing and doing as a teaching artist. The concept of a teaching artist was coined by Taylor (2003:53) refers to a skilled applied theatre practitioner who can teach in a group context (Hellemann 2017:2). According to Prentki and Preston (2009) in Hellemann (2017:1), applied theatre describes a wide range of theatrical and drama processes that often position the audience and performers as participants in alternative theatre spaces such as schools, hospitals, community halls and prisons. Therefore, this paper offers a brief insight into how this applied theatre project was structured and what findings emerged from this drama-based methodology in a special needs classroom. According to English (2002:8), drama and action research with special-needs learners is rare in South Africa. English's observation propelled me to pursue the drama lessons project at a local special needs school to grow research on the identified knowledge and practice gap, thus making this a critical study.

The chosen school was founded in 1981 to cater for learners with intellectual disabilities and learning barriers from lower-income backgrounds (Hellemann 2017:43). Lower-income

background is one of the socio-economic barriers that pose social challenges that make participating in school life difficult. Hence, the White Paper in the Department of Education classified it as a barrier to learning, together with other factors such as 'language, a lack of parental recognition and involvement, and attitudes and inadequate opportunity for programme-to-work linkages' (Department of Education 2005:10). According to Ruscheinski, most of the learners also experience additional barriers to learning that include 'epilepsy, physical disabilities, cerebral palsy, hard of hearing, deafness, partially sighted, blindness, behavioural disorder, autism and many others' (Ruscheinski, in Hellemann 2017:12). These learners are therefore diagnosed with intellectual difficulties because of the significant imbalance between their mental and developmental age, affecting their cognitive, social and emotional abilities (Baroff 1991).

Because of the above-noted challenges and barriers, the school offers a 'specialised teaching methodology that adjusts the curriculum for specific educational needs' drawn from the Grade 3 level curriculum and assessment policy statement (CAPS) used in mainstream schooling (Ruscheinski 2013:7, 13). According to Rothman (2013), the local special school accepts learners with an intelligence quotient (IQ) of 70 or less. Hence, they only offer a curriculum up to the Grade 3 level. However, at the school, the CAPS is adapted and extended to teach 'functional and practical learning methods such as counting money, crossing the road, and workforce skills' (Rothman in Hellemann 2017:25). These skills equip learners to participate in the programme-to-work linkages, which provide learners with work environment experiences as outlined in the Guidelines for Inclusive Learning Programmes (DBE in Hellemann 2017:3).

Therefore, instead of having Grades 1–3, as mainstream schools do, the school offers seven different educational programmes: Primary Phase, Junior Phase, Middle Phase, Senior Phase, Vocational Phase, Skills Phase and Practical Phase (Rothman 2013). These transitional school phases replace the grading system used in mainstream schools. For example, the primary phase covers basic reading and counting competencies in the mother tongue, and the complexity varies in the Junior and Middle phases. The Senior, Vocational and Skills phases equip the learners with functional academics for the world of work. According to Moosa in Hellemann (2017:7), school-to-work linkages, otherwise known as '"Programme-to-Work linkages," are creative and work-related programmes that expose learners to labour market activities that align with learners' career interests and talents'. The practical phase is more for learners with the 'weakest level of learning capacity; therefore, they learn life-related skills such as 'counting money, cooking and crossing the road', as noted before (Rothman 2013). I worked with the Skills Phase class, which equips the learners with cooking, art and craft-making and gardening skills (Hellemann 2017:43).

Although the school has valid reasons for offering Grade 3–level education, I argue for the extension of the curriculum through drama techniques in this paper. However, this advocacy also considers that in addition to cognitive and economic barriers to learning, schools in South Africa often do not offer drama because most teachers are not drama specialists, nor do they have adequate or relevant content knowledge and skills needed to teach drama effectively, as Nompula (2012) in Hellemann (2017:44) notes. This is also true for the special school discussed here, which does not have teachers to teach Drama education (Hellemann 2017:44). The paper outlines how drama techniques can benefit curriculum extension, especially the skills phase learners who need to explore the transition from a special needs school to the workplace. For the project, I worked with a group of 12 learners between the ages of 18–21 years. The aim was to use drama methods as a functional academic pedagogy that can help learners with the social and emotional aspects of this transition from school to the workplace. Here, I show how the Drama-in-Education (D-i-E) teaching method helped me set up scenarios, ask questions, discuss and navigate the workplace transition creatively using a capability approach (Hellemann 2017:15). According to Vorhaus (2015) in Hellemann, a capability approach to Drama refers to a way of working that focuses on 'what the learners can do when they are given a choice and provided with a suitable opportunity to engage' (2017:173).

Defining learning disability: A social model approach

Terms and definitions of disability often determine the type of curriculum or pedagogical approach teachers take. Here, I discuss various definitions of disability to frame a pedagogical capability approach in this study. Hayhow and Trowsdale's definitions of disability guided this study (Hellemann 2017:30). Their definitions align with the capability approach because it moves away from the medical model, which tends to focus on cognitive and intellectual limitations without considering other capabilities of the learners (Hellemann 2017:34). As such, the study used creative teaching and learning approaches that align with the capability model, thus moving away from a restricted view of medical and psychological perspectives that are often limiting (Hellemann 2017:9).

The medical model relies on testing for physical impairments and chronic disorders to determine how they affect the body's biological functions (Hellemann 2017:9). Similarly, the psychological model also tests for developmental abilities and mental health (Baroff 1991:3–4). These models foster a diagnostic lens, which views disability from a two-dimensional perspective that determines one's function according to ability or disability (Hellemann 2017:9), thus making the distinction exclusionary in nature, as affirmed by Conroy (2009:1). Furthermore, the diagnostic perspective only highlights biological and mental factors as shortfalls that affect one's full participation in society, but it neglects some criteria (Conroy 2009:1). By extension, it does not recognise systematic policies, and socio-economic and cultural factors can also affect how people with disabilities experience life (Hellemann 2017:9). The social model

acknowledges that disability is more than just physical and cognitive impairment; it also includes how society frames and interacts with people with disabilities. The reactions and perceptions can limit people's access to social services and fundamental rights such as education and economic security (Watson 2012 in Hellemann 2017:9).

The above engagement led me to conclude that the social model of disability offers an inclusive spectrum of barriers to participation in social life (Hellemann 2017:9). I used the social model to frame disability as a social and political construct that determines and limits one's access to resources and participation in societal structures. The limited access and participation prevent humans with physical and mental challenges from fully functioning in society, as they create conditions that make it difficult to live freely. These become social barriers that contribute to one's disability. Therefore, I see the social model as an advocacy tool that asks society to engage in praxis. This directly links to Freire's call for the oppressed and the oppressor to reflect on their roles in maintaining social barriers (Hellemann 2017:9–10). Accordingly, praxis is about critical reflection and action; when these are performed intentionally, both agents can transition from encouraging oppressive structures to embracing liberated practices (Freire in Hellemann 2017:10).

With the above consideration in mind, I advocated for better engagement between teachers and learners in a special needs class. Hence, I proposed using theatre techniques as possible pedagogical approaches. These allowed for fostering a capability-based teaching and learning experience for learners with special needs. I believe that drama engagement tools such as t-i-r can bring learners' capabilities to the fore. As Hayhow and Trowsdale (2013:74) state, physical action in drama often serves the 'theatrically untrained' well, encouraging them to express ideas and feelings in unique ways. As noted before, the capability approach is about what learners can do when guided accordingly. Therefore, I argued that 'drama as a multimodal experience' embraces various strengths and capabilities, essential when working with learners with diverse learning barriers and disabilities (Hellemann 2017:19).

Furthermore, another aim of the research was to use drama to challenge certain perceptions of how teachers approach pedagogy with learners with perceived barriers to learning (Hellemann 2017). Kilinc et al. (2016:3) state that it is common for special needs teachers to avoid teaching learners beyond the Grade 3 level curriculum because they often have a low expectation of the learners' capabilities. Lenakakis and Koltsida also noted a similar trait in their research. Their research also showed that teachers often avoided rigorous curricula for learners with disabilities, thus limiting the development of 'social and cognitive skills such as problem-solving, negotiation, and critical thinking' (Lenakakis & Koltsida 2017:2). Additionally, Laauwen's (2004:138) observation about how South African special needs schools face challenges of rigorous curriculum implementation affirms why this research was necessary.

The abovementioned perceptions of teachers needed challenging (Hellemann 2017:14). These perceptions are testament to Freire's (1993:29) 'paternalistic thinking and practice' which prevents the learners from engaging with the content critically because they are viewed as incompetent. In this regard, Freire (1993:29) sees this paternalist approach as a banking concept of education. The process fosters pedagogical practices and attitudes that give the teacher too much authority in the class while positioning learners as passive subjects.

The above banking approach narrates a teacher-centred pedagogical practice (Hellemann 2017:7). For learners with special needs, this approach holds adverse effects of labelling people as dysfunctional, impaired and disabled, which encourages exclusion, further perpetuating the disability stigma (Stalker 2012:128). Drawing on Freire once more, one can see how a teacher-centred practice causes a 'teacher-student contradiction', whereby the teacher is the one-dimensional source of knowledge and learners are passive recipients of knowledge (Hellemann 2017:6). This contradiction affords the learners limited freedom to participate in their own knowledge production and acquisition. Therefore, I argued for exploring an alternative emancipatory pedagogical practice in a special needs classroom. As Freire (1993:55) states, the solution lies in changing these learners' educational structures. Drama methods such as teacher-in-role (t-i-r) provided this possibility. I discuss its meaning and uses in the following section.

Towards a capability teaching approach: Pairing Freire with the teacher-in-role technique

Because of the notable similarities between Freire's banking concept of education and learning disability stigma as highlighted by the social model, I needed to challenge the banking approach. Hence, I adopted Freire's 'problem-posing pedagogical approach' that encouraged teaching methods that supported learners' abilities and capabilities (Hellemann 2017:15). Therefore, I worked against the stigma-based teaching and learning approach encouraged by the medical and psychological model of disability. I introduced drama-based lessons that created a classroom environment that embraced different strengths and competencies (Hellemann 2017:38). This neutralised my authority in the class by freeing me from the burden of being the all-knowing expert (Thompson 2003:28). As a drama teacher, I could not position myself as an expert because this would create a power dynamic that Freire warned against. Instead, I opted to be a co-creator with the learners, subsequently showing how drama practices can reject the idea of the teacher as an expert (Hellemann 2017).

Therefore, I used Freire's transformative education approach to strengthen the drama technique choices that posed problems and positioned learners as problem solvers. Though often set up in a temporary framework, Hatton in Hellemann (2017:15) 'believed that drama engagements allow learners to exceed

expectations set by the diagnostic medical model', which labels learners using predetermined perceptions. My research stood on the premise of using the drama-based pedagogical methods to challenge diagnostic labels. I used drama methods such as role-playing, teacher-in-role, storytelling and playmaking to invite learners to engage creatively and practically. Here learners showcased their cognitive competencies, enhanced talents, redefined individual identities and explored different capabilities and career pursuits. The fictional setting allowed learners to discover their strengths, which opened opportunities to solve problems, manage conflict and negotiate social interactions (Hellemann 2017:38).

Working from the notion that most South African teachers do not often embrace inclusive teaching, I saw the opportunity to address this concern through this study. As the teachers in Nel et al. (2016)'s study affirmed, teachers do find it challenging to implement inclusive education in their classrooms (p. 11). Part of the challenge also rests on the type of teacher training they receive. The training does not offer adequate strategies that teachers could implement with their learners with disabilities (Nel et al. 2016:11). Departing from this trajectory, I believe drama in this research project served as a valuable and creative learning method that foregrounded inclusive education principles.

Other concerns regarding the lack of implementation of drama techniques came from a study by Engelbrecht et al. (2016). These teachers noted a genuine concern for the lack of resources such as multimodal equipment and poor funding from government sectors to improve their teaching methods (Engelbrecht et al. 2016:523–532). I argued that drama does not require extensive resources as a creative teaching method in response to their concerns (Hellemann 2017:16). The drama discipline positions teachers as resources, meaning they can use their bodies as teaching tools by playing different characters. They can achieve this by using minimal resources such as costumes and props from one's cupboard.

Therefore, the abovementioned suggestions show how drama can 'disrupt economically constructed division between those who can and those who cannot engage in critical curricula' (Hellemann 2017:16). However, this alternative and engaged teaching must happen in a flexible learning environment. The methodology section of this paper shows the steps I took in implementing the lessons. As a drama facilitator, I had to be intentional about what activities to include to engage the learners. As Vorhaus (2015:180) noted, the facilitator needs to be clear on which tasks occur collectively and which are individual, because each context showcases different abilities.

Research design and methods

As noted in the introduction, Nelson (2013:9) defines practice-led research as a methodology that finds practical ways of knowing by doing. Practice-led research is a growing methodology in South Africa, especially in the applied theatre and performance fields (Baxter 2013 in Hellemann 2017:45). The method relies on building a solid relationship between theory and practice (Barrett 2010:1). Here, it was essential to use the social model of disability and capability theory as guiding principles for the drama-based intervention lessons with the Skills Phase group. As such, the project had interventionist research elements. According to Penuel (2014:97), intervention research use 'design, implementation and research' to develop new ways of supporting learning in 'real educational settings'. As a result, intervention research is a critical component of cultural-historical activity theory, which advocates for learning to be organised within an activity system that yields new discoveries (Penuel 2014:97–98). In this instance, the practice of this research rested on designing an intervention programme for learners with learning disabilities through a series of drama-based activities geared towards discovering new abilities.

The first phase of the methodology involved doing a substantial amount of reading on special needs education to establish what theory would work best with the practical components of my drama-based pedagogy. Thus, I used Freire's problem-posing theory and the capability theory as additional elements that aided my research design. This is demonstrated in the former parts of this paper. In the second phase, I created 13 one-hour lessons that combine the uses of drama and Life Orientation (LO) topics. Each lesson covered a specific topic and theme guided by the CAPS. The third phase of the research involved reflections on how the process unfolded, thus making more links and connections between the first and second phases of the study.

The unique nature of the practice-led methodology made it possible for me to connect practice, theory and reflection in this applied theatre and drama-based study. The methods offered in the drama-based lessons allowed me to establish a strong working relationship between drama techniques and special needs pedagogy. By working this way, I formulated a practical way of teaching Grade 10–12 LO curriculum concepts using Creative Art (Drama) Topic 2, particularly as a tool to explore workplace environments, in 13 lessons.

Life Orientation is a subject recognised in the CAPS, a curriculum guideline document for teaching and assessment in South Africa. The LO subject contains six topics that are development of the self in society, social and environmental responsibility, democracy and human rights, careers and career choices, study skills and physical education (Department of Basic Education 2011:8). Accordingly, the LO CAPS document considers LO to be a subject that teaches 'skills, knowledge, and values for the personal, social, intellectual, emotional and physical growth of learners' (DBEa 2011:8). Furthermore, it is a subject committed to developing and engaging learners in:

> A variety of life skills to solve problems, to make informed decisions and choices and to take appropriate actions to live meaningfully and successfully in a rapidly changing society. It not only focuses on knowledge, but also emphasises the importance of the application of skills and values in real-life situations. (p. 8)

Working from this understanding of the relevance of LO as a subject, I used these themes to explore how drama methods can serve as tools to bring these social skills to the fore. The lessons drew on the Grade 10–12 LO curricula, in response to the themes that encourage teachers to facilitate learners' transition from educational institutions to the workplace. The themes range from working on building relationships and understanding of the people around us to issues of power, status and conflict in the workplace and decision-making and problem-solving capacities (DBEa 2011:10).

The drama-based lessons used all the above themes. However, for this paper, I focus on how I used the decision-making and problem-solving themes to extend learning beyond the Grade 3 level, showing more rigorous curricula engagement and discussions about future employment. The process became a way of 'exploring embodied knowledge, lived experiences, and understanding the knowledge in D-i-E with people with learning disabilities from a South African viewpoint' (Hellemann 2017:45). Drama served as a vehicle to create these embodied experiences for the learners.

Drama is an art form recognised under the Creative Arts subject endorsed by CAPS. Hence, the Creative Arts CAPS document states that this art form has the potential to equip learners with interpersonal skills. Through drama, the learners can embody and explore human interaction through a safe mode of exploration whereby they get to act and reflect, thus gaining awareness (Department of Basic Education 2011:8–9). I structured the teaching and learning to involve theatre games, storytelling and teacher-in-role techniques inspired by Topic 2 of the Creative Arts Drama CAPS document to address some of the LO themes. Topic 2, referred to as drama elements in playmaking, includes engaging in drama improvisation processes that have a structure, explore a theme and encourage characterisation work that involves formulating details and social events (DBEb 2011:15). In this regard, playmaking informed my use of teacher-in-role as a technique and a structure for drama-based lessons with an LO content focus.

Peter refers to this way of working as a 'cross-curricular' teaching and learning approach, which combines curriculum content from different contexts (Peter 1995:13). Hence, I used drama elements in play to explore LO themes in the lessons. The lessons in the Skills Phase class were with 12 learners with learning difficulties, five female students, seven male students and the class assistant. The participants were from isiXhosa- and Afrikaans-speaking backgrounds, but they could converse in English well. However, we used a mixture of all three languages to keep the conversation and interactions relatively flexible, with the class assistant as an interpreter.

As noted before, I used various drama methods, but teacher-in-role (t-i-r) helped me achieve active participation in the classroom. Thus, the paper focuses on t-i-r as a methodological tool. Teacher-in-role is a teaching strategy a teacher can use to step into a role with the learners (Hellemann 2017:37). Here, the teacher uses this tool to guide learners into the world of playmaking through semistructured improvisations and drama activities such as role-playing, nonfictional scenarios and theatre games (Bolton 1998:182). Dorothy Heathcote, one of the leading experts in Drama-in-Education (D-i-E) created the t-i-r technique while working in the United Kingdom in the 1970s (Schonmann 2011:8). Drama-in-Education methods have continuously proved effective in establishing a dialogical relationship between students and teachers (Wagner 1999:128).

The D-i-E uses in a classroom extend beyond creating theatre plays (Hellemann 2017:33). The various methods can aid in making complex concepts easy to understand through interactive engagements (Andersen 2004:282). As an instrument of D-i-E, t-i-r creates a shared learning experience that can happen while the teacher is working in and out of role (Bolton & Heathcote 1999:178). In this regard, t-i-r challenges the learner–teacher power dynamics in the class (Hellemann 2017:52). It resolves the student–teacher contradiction as an alternative approach that actively invites learners to participate by sharing thoughts and ideas with the teacher (Freire 1993:64).

Contextually, this qualitative special school case study is about drama-based pedagogy and research with learners with intellectual barriers within the capability theory (Hellemann 2017:46). In this regard, the learners are positioned as active research participants. This view is influenced by Leighton (2009) in Hellemann (2017:46), who encourages research subjects to be positioned as engaged cognitive thinkers and decision-makers during the research despite their medical diagnoses. Therefore, to cultivate and facilitate thinking and decision-making, I used t-i-r as an avenue to empower the Skills Phase learners (Hellemann 2017:68). Through an in-depth analysis of the t-i-r 'structures, processes and outcomes', I gained a greater knowledge of the emancipatory nature of drama, especially with learners with barriers to learning in a South African context (O'Toole 2006:21). Here, I interpreted the relationship between the t-i-r and Freire's theory by finding corresponding moments and ideas in the data collected during the research process (Carroll 1996:78).

Working with the notion of praxis, founded by Schön, reflecting on the knowledge acquired through practice was paramount in this study (Nelson 2013:40). Accordingly, reflection is about making decisions, putting them into practice and assessing whether they are effective or need revisiting (Taylor 1996:28). As a teaching artist, I reflected on my practice through a 'self-study method' (Hellemann 2017:46). According to Mitchell and Weber (2005) as cited in Hellemann, a self-study approach requires an 'inward analysis and reflection of own educational beliefs and how those impacted the way I implemented the curriculum and my perceptions of the learners' knowledge development' (2017:47). In line with this approach, I collected data through field notes from learners'

reflections, my lesson observations and reflections and teacher feedback. These sources were not only crucial as data but also reference tools for validity and self-reflection. Here I drew on Freire's notion of making education transformational. As part of my praxis, I strived for a continuous constant dialogue between the data collected, theory and my reflections (Hellemann 2017:47). The continuous dialogue on t-i-r helped resolve the student–teacher contradiction that is often teacher-centred by transforming it into a 'learner-centred and problem-posing pedagogy in my pedagogical practice' (Hellemann 2017:47). Therefore, I note the success of the t-i-r processes in the Skills Phase class.

As noted before, the capability approach grounds the implementation of the lessons. Moreover, Freire's theory of a problem-posing pedagogy also governed the theoretical underpinnings of the study that offered specific categories, connections and themes needed for the discussion (Hellemann 2017:47). Accordingly, concepts arising from theory often guide what to look for when using a deductive reasoning approach to data analysis. For this study, the t-i-r framework helped me locate subcategories and theoretical extensions 'to look for similarities and familiar references to words, feelings and thoughts derived from theory' (Lenakakis & Koltsida in Hellemann 2017:47). Therefore, I used the interpretive analytical framework for the evidence I provide to show t-i-r supports the capability approach in disability studies (Hellemann 2017:47–48). In the subsequent section, I discuss how the learners demonstrated their critical thinking and decision-making competencies as individuals and collectively. The analysis shows how the interactions showcased the learners' ability to work in a group, contribute to ideas and make independent decisions (Hellemann 2017:16).

Ethical considerations

The author made an application for full ethical approval and degree proposal to the university's Humanities Faculty Higher Degrees Committee (HFHDC) and the Drama Department. The Drama Department application involved asking for written informed consent to send to the learners, the school and the parents to grant me permission to implement drama lessons and collect data as part of a practice-led research process. The consent to write about my practice-led research, observe the teachers and conduct an in-depth interview with the teaching assistant followed procedures that ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of learners and the teachers implicated in the research. Therefore, the Drama Department approved my application, which they forwarded to the Higher Degrees Committee, a higher academic body that reviews ethical applications alongside research proposals. All research projects conducted in the university involving human participants are guided by the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committees. I received ethical clearance from the HFHDC in April 2017 after the committee approved the research proposal. Research ethics reviews did not have an ethics number before implementing the new ethics online review application system in 2019.

Discussion: t-i-r as a capability method and a tool for learner empowerment in the Skills Phase classroom

The restaurant performance event

The restaurant performance or scene explored the school-to-work linkages and the transition to work curriculum concepts. As explained, the Skills Phase class is a transitional class that helps learners make school-to-work linkages through skilled labour-related pedagogies. It was a semi-improvisation performance that summarised and captured both a process and the product element of the study. The restaurant scenario was an 'educational setup and a theatrical performance that showcased abilities and capabilities' (Hellemann 2017:69). The restaurant idea emerged from our conflict management workshops, which involved an improvised scene between a romantic couple at a restaurant (Hellemann 2017:64). It was in this scenario that the learners demonstrated their playmaking skills. This playmaking process led to the creation of the restaurant performance. In this learning process, the t-i-r conceptual idea of questioning, building belief and role-playing foregrounded active participation.

The learners enjoyed working on the restaurant scene; hence, I decided to extend it and explore it as a workable scene. It presented rich potential as a workplace environment and a space for interactions and relationships, linked directly to the CAPS Life Orientation concepts. Accordingly, the scene gave the learners a chance to put their problem-solving skills into practice by thinking about what decisions to make and actions to take as members of society (DBEa 2011:8). As noted throughout, problem-solving and decision-making are vital concepts that form part of human relationships and social skills, which the learners were able to participate in and rehearse for real life in the future. By using a real-life staged event such as the restaurant scenario, the author could encourage learners to practise problem-solving in real time (Hellemann 2017:49). As a result, they became confident as active participants because t-i-r had raised the academic rigour of the LO and Drama content (Hellemann 2017:49).

Building apprenticeship belief: Showcasing the learners' decision-making and playmaking abilities

For the t-i-r technique to be effective, 'I had to play down my own authority' (Hellemann 2017:38). It meant interrogating content through t-i-r questioning techniques, often useful tools for shifting status to promote group action (Wagner in Hellemann 2017:38). According to Wagner (1999:128), t-i-r questioning techniques are helpful when working in and out of role. These involve asking learners questions that help build the belief. Heathcote's notion of building belief sets up the drama platform by asking difficult questions to aid the dramatic action that unfolds (Wagner in Hellemann 2017:35). Therefore, I had to think of engaging questions to help the learners buy into the idea of a fictional restaurant as a place

of employment. The belief building helped the learners invest in the present lie or fictional workplace.

The building belief stage was the most vocal the learners had ever been during the study. In this instance, they communicated their ideas and opinions about setting up a restaurant. As shown in Figure 1, the learners engaged in a brainstorming session, where I was the scribe. The building belief discussions demonstrated how effective the t-i-r questioning technique was in eliciting responses and decision-making. Here, through the t-i-r questioning method, I was able to position the learners as fellow makers, which is a different role to that of 'passive responders' as they worked with me, the teacher, to build knowledge (Bolton & Heathcote 1999 in Hellemann 2017:38). As a nonauthoritative teaching method, t-i-r became an ideal method to guide learning and enabled knowledge acquisition capabilities and possibilities in the Skills Phase class, thus liberating the learners to think freely (Hellemann 2017:30). The group made clear choices about who worked in which restaurant section based on their perceived people skills and cooking talents. Their choices demonstrated good self-knowledge and self-awareness.

The interactions transformed the classroom into an autonomous space that allowed the learners to express their voices and opinions and share ideas (Hellemann 2017:70). The pupils became independent critical thinkers who used a fictional context to make sense of their realities and experiences in the world (Freire 1993:62). From the questions and interactions out of role, we came up with the name of the restaurant (Fish and Dip Lekker Ding!), the menu, the characters and the workers' working conditions, that is, wages, transport and negotiating terms of employment (Hellemann 2017:69). Accordingly, the group negotiated among themselves about who should work in each section of the restaurant. For example:

> [T]hose who were known to be impatient, volunteered (themselves and others) to work in the kitchen, while others volunteered to work in the front as waiters because they knew they were good with people. (Hellemann 2017:69–70)

The group chose Learner J as the restaurant manager because they knew he was a good communicator and worked well with others. His capabilities and leadership skills became more recognisable in this fictional context, especially to his peers. Through creating this character, Learner J formed a new identity, thus 'disrupting the beliefs imposed by diagnostic label' (Hatton in Hellemann 2017:77).

Initially, it was challenging to transform the classroom space and shift the authoritative teacher–student relationship.
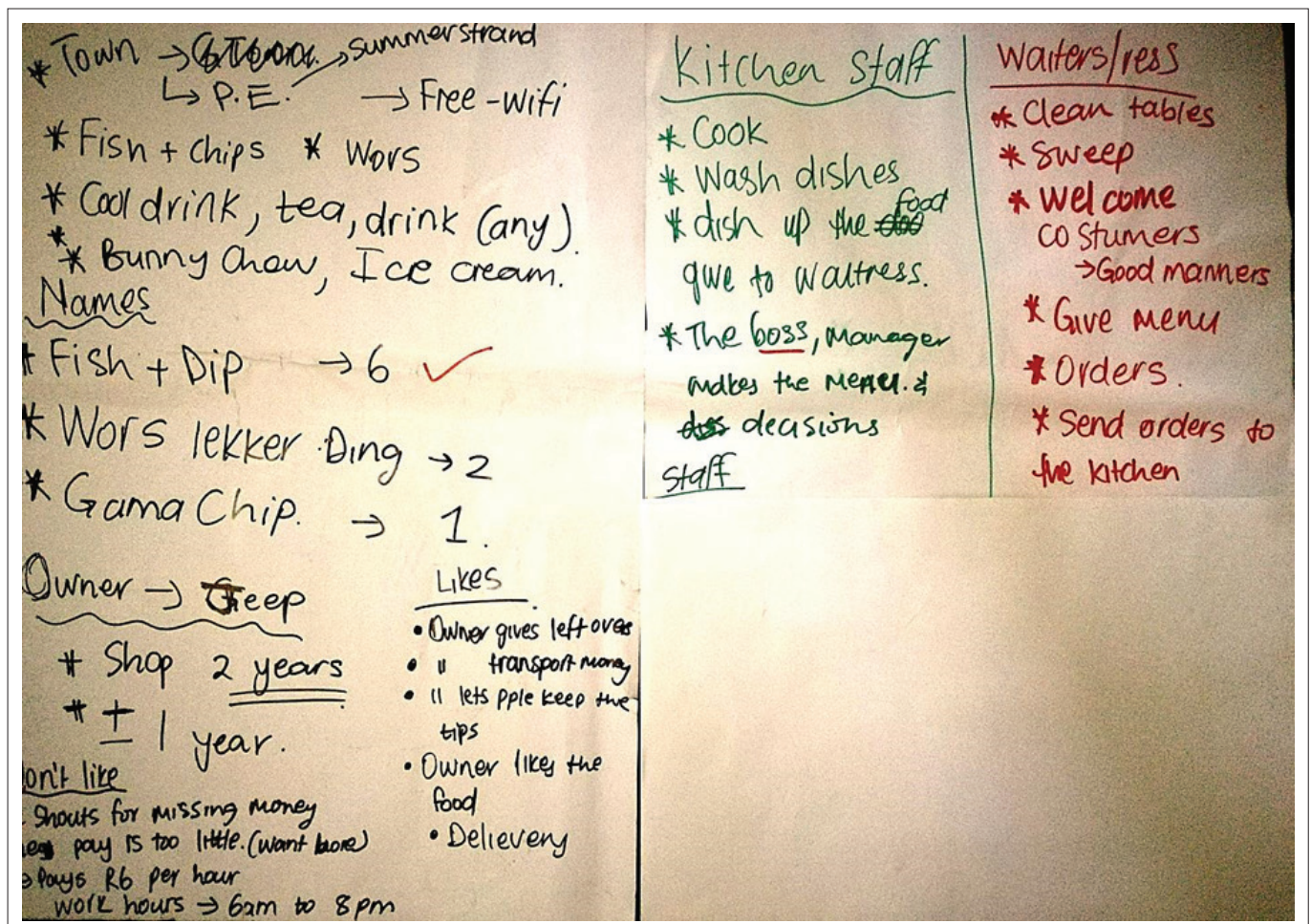
Source: Hellemann, P.C., 2017, 'Teacher-in-role as a problem-posing method for learners in a special needs school in South Africa', Unpublished MA dissertation, Rhodes University
FIGURE 1: The brainstorming notes gathered from the building belief stage working out of role.

FIGURE 2: The menu item detailed and priced by the learners during the building belief stage. Hellemann designed the menu in collaboration with the learners.

Understandably, it took learners a while to trust and buy into the method and the new working relationship. The learners often resisted the neutral power and status (Hellemann 2017:53). I believe the resistance showed how the learners were unsure of how else to interact with me as a teacher in this new classroom practice. There were numerous moments of uncomfortableness because of unresponsiveness and awkward silences from the learners (Hellemann 2017:53). Although this was uncomfortable, I continued to find ways to engage the learners.

I did not have to teach them what each restaurant's role entailed. The learners relied on their personal experiences, social interactions and the skills training they received at the school. By drawing on this unique knowledge and lived experiences, the learners found investing in the roles of the characters they played easier. For example, when we created the menu shown in Figure 2, they drew on their own experiences of having been to a restaurant. They knew that the food items needed pricing, but they did not want them to be too expensive. They negotiated the pricing among themselves and agreed on the prices shown on the menu.

During the questioning phase, they were not shy to share their ideas and use an 'actual scenario or theme to connect real-world and curriculum content' (Hellemann 2017:38). In this regard, t-i-r made the learners' participants confident.

The application became evident as the learners freely interpreted the content through discussion, acting and reasoning (Wagner 1999:66). My role as a customer was the first in-role interaction in a t-i-r activity during the rehearsal process. It allowed me to 'work within the group' and stimulate reactions out of various the characters' (Neelands 2004 in Hellemann 2017:70). In working in-role, I presented them with multiple versions of customers, which they had to cater for based on the orders placed and the customers' moods. I used various characteristics and emotions (grumpy, happy, unhappy) to pose problems, ask for help, be disappointed with my order, refuse to pay the bill or ask for the manager. The learners enjoyed rehearsing various responses and reflecting on how well they coped with demanding customers.

At first, the learners found approaching a restaurant's customers (me in various roles) unsettling. They were hesitant to come to me in-role, and when they did, they did not engage in any confrontations. Although they found this uncomfortable, the process was geared towards getting them to pre-empt how they might react to uneasy interactions such as conflict or disagreements in their future workplaces (Hellemann 2017:70). As Mimick (1999) in Hellemann (2017:70) states, it is not uncommon for drama in the classroom to be used to unpack unsettling experiences such as conflict. The interaction gave the learners the advantage of

trying as many strategies to the scenario as possible, thus presenting them with various reactions and possibilities. This trial-and-error method also demonstrated how one could try another if one is not confident with one strategy – a valuable skill necessary to improve problem-solving abilities.

I used t-i-r to help learners get comfortable with multiple decision-making explorations. The teacher can plan different experiences through the role (playing other characters) according to the class's needs. Doing the scene multiple times builds the learners' confidence to join (Bolton & Heathcote 1999:183). The learners tried as many responses as possible to a situation through this approach. This interaction prepared them for the two audience groups made up of fellow peers, the local special schoolteachers and Drama Department staff and students from the local university (Hellemann 2017:50).

The local special school audience came to the dress rehearsal interaction or performance, as noted in Figure 3. With this audience, we could 'test, shape and develop their drama abilities' (Hayhow & Trowsdale in Hellemann 2017:71). Moreover, this interaction became a learning opportunity to think critically about how they react to customers. It also helped them understand apprenticeship responsibilities, such as those in the fictional restaurant interaction. We also used this opportunity to evaluate what dialogues, exchanges and responses worked and the consequences thereof. It gave the learners the confidence to perform a drama production, whereby they simultaneously learned how to approach

customers and solve problems in real time. According to Hayhow and Trowsdale (2013:75), play, pretending and performing are more than fun activities. They promote problem-solving, risk-taking and thinking skills (Hellemann 2017:75). The impact of drama lessons on the learners' thinking skills was captured by their teacher as follows:

> Drama lessons have made the learners outspoken and more prepared to challenge decisions made by me as their teacher. Some were hesitant to partake but then changed their attitudes and could not wait for drama days. The upcoming school concert is also less of a challenge, and the learners are eager to show off. (Teacher E in Hellemann 2017:74)

Problem-solving and communicating ideas through playmaking

After 2 weeks of planning and rehearsing the restaurant scene, the scene developed into a fully interactive performance for an invited audience. The performance included an exhibition of the learners' art and craft products throughout the year with additional material from videos and photographs collected during the rehearsal and research process. The drama performance and exhibition created the 'landscape for the forgotten to live' (Zatzman 2003:36). Through the drama experience offered in the Skills Phase class, the learners could enhance their capabilities and abilities in addition to those they learnt at school as part of their daily learning. Moreover, transforming the physical classroom space into a make-believe restaurant interaction was significant in allowing these capabilities to come to the fore. The transformation gave

Source: Hellemann, P.C., 2017, 'Teacher-in-role as a problem-posing method for learners in a special needs school in South Africa', Unpublished MA dissertation, Rhodes University
FIGURE 3: Dress rehearsal for the school staff and fellow peers (Photo credit: Paul Greenway).

the learners a chance to think about the restaurant's layout critically and plan how they wanted the space to look and function as an imagined restaurant. For example, they added tables and chairs, made menus and created signage for the restaurant, as evident in Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3. The transformation also 'extended to designing and setting up the performance space by incorporating "costume" such as aprons they made at school, and other props like cups and serviettes' (Hellemann 2017:72).

Moreover, the learners decided to serve lemonade during the open interaction or performance, which they learnt to make as part of their skills training (Hellemann 2017:72). They also chose to play music as part of the restaurant ambience. This added to the overall building belief of the environment. Although the rehearsal process and the final performance or interaction were fictional, they became spaces for the learners to show their abilities to cope with hospitality work environment demands.

All drama performances have a moment of tension or an issue to resolve, often revealed through interactions between performers. In this drama performance, the tension was in unknown outcomes of the interactions between a new audience and the participant performers (Hellemann 2017:73). The unpredictable effects allowed the learners and the guests to establish a relationship guided by the fictional context as a safe frame of interaction. These customers were audience members from the Drama Department staff, students and grounds and teaching staff (Hellemann 2017:73). Arguably, the 'unknownness' of how the interactions would go freed the participants from worrying about doing the acting well (Bolton & Heathcote 1999:181). The performance was not about demonstrating acting skills but rather showing how well the learners can improvise and solve customer-related problems in context. The learners understood that the lessons leading up to this performance were not about teaching them how to act but about using drama as a tool for problem-solving. This knowledge allowed the learners to 'make the story up as it happened without judgment about their creation, i.e., am I doing it right or wrong' (Hellemann 2017:73).

Although the participants had no formal theatre training, they handled the semi-improvised performance well, highlighting their 'capabilities as drama participants and learners ready for the workplace' (Hellemann 2017:73). Because they had time to rehearse various responses during the making of the scene, by the time the final product or performance came, the learners had built up the much-needed confidence to approach the actual customers.

The guest audience also did not know what the interaction would entail. I enrolled them through emoji stickers. The stickers portrayed varying emotions and attitudes, suggesting a distinct customer or character each audience member should play (Hellemann 2017:73). These emotion stickers opened opportunities for varying responses and solutions. Although most responses were unpredictable, a few were like those we explored during the rehearsal process, such as

calling the manager if the customer was too difficult to help. It was a privilege to see how the learners grew confident as decision-makers and improved their interpersonal skills.

However, what was more intriguing to note was hearing what they had to say about their experience and growth throughout the drama lessons. Here, I drew on Bolton and Heathcote's argument on the final performance product's effect on participants. Accordingly, as the authors note, often participants 'engage with how they saw themselves before the playmaking and who they are after it' (Bolton & Heathcote in Hellemann 2017:73). Hearing what they had to say about themselves affirmed why this methodology is essential. For example, Learner J, who played the restaurant manager role, noted how he found drama lessons fun because they taught him how to talk in front of other people and take charge as a manager.

Much like Learner J, Learner D also found the lessons fun, but the impact was on how he learned to believe in himself. This reflection showed how drama effectively builds self-esteem and confidence. For Learner K, drama lessons helped them learn how to write restaurant menus, and the highlight for them was sharing their homemade lemonade with the guests (Hellemann 2017:73). More than the learners having fun and learning many new skills, the performance became a space for tackling perceptions about what people with learning disabilities can or cannot do (Hellemann 2017:73). Through the restaurant performance, the learners challenged social stereotypes and disability stigma by proving or showing alternative stories or realities of the special needs learners (Hatton 2009:91). This experience demonstrated the value these learners can bring into a learning space when presented with the opportunity.

It was fulfilling to see the schoolteachers and peers witness 'what the learners can do and reflect on what they witnessed them doing' (Hellemann 2017:74). By extension, the participation and the witnessing gave the learners a sense of achievement and boosted their self-esteem and self-awareness. As I argue in my thesis, instead of trying to prove whether the lessons changed the learners' self-perceptions or not, I focus on how the process helped challenge the medical model classifications. These classifications note that learners with learning disabilities often have:

> [D]ifficulty with transition; being afraid of trying new things; having difficulty in problem-solving; having difficulty remembering things well; being unable to transfer learning to a new situation; finding it difficult to comprehend. (Moosa in Hellemann 2017:75)

However, the drama-based lessons rebutted these classifications, as learners showed themselves to be capable beyond the limits set by the medical model. I capture this progress as follows in my reflection in line with the capability approach:

> The learners demonstrated that they could deal with weekly transitions as we explored different aspects of the Grade 10–12 LO curriculum and tried new activities with each session.

Additionally, they used the workplace scenarios posed in the session to show their problem-solving abilities while working in and out of roles by relating their solutions to their own experiences and transferring new skills to various situations. (Hellemann 2017:76)

Moreover, there is something special about watching a child perform a drama. It leads them to accept and even appreciate that they are observed as they do something well within a group (Hayhow & Trowsdale in Hellemann 2017:74). One of the audience members also noted how impressive and confident the learners were in their interactions with them and how they solved problems he posed in-role as a difficult customer (Grumpy customer in Hellemann 2017:74). I believe drama provided the safety of discovery that made such triumphs achievable, thus giving the learners more confidence. As Mimick (1999:281–282) notes, drama provides discovery safety through activities such as role-playing and enhances inter- and intrapersonal development. Through drama activities, these learners 'discovered who they were, what they liked and who they could be, thus destabilising the status quo thinking and what society assumed to be true about their abilities' (Mimick in Hellemann 2017:73–74), therefore getting others to think more positively about their capabilities and skills in the social world.

Recommendations and conclusion

I summarise the recommendations made in the final thesis as follows:

- Special needs schools need to adopt a cross-curricular approach to offer learners a curriculum beyond the Grade 3 level.
- Teacher-in-role is a creative teaching method that can benefit special needs pedagogy and neutralise teachers' authority significantly when facilitating lessons exploring school-to-work transitions. It provides a safe yet effective fictional setup that allows learners to make decisions and try out new ideas. In cases where teachers are not confident in pursuing the method, they can partner up with drama practitioners in the community or student teachers specialising in applied theatre or D-i-E training. This collaborative approach can improve special needs learners' access to drama education without putting strain on teachers to do more training.
- For teachers interested in training in the t-i-r method, the training could be adopted as part of the Integrated Quality Management System teacher training development. IQMS is a teachers' performance evaluation system developed by the Department of Basic Education. The system assesses teacher effectiveness in schools to promote 'personal growth, accountability and professional development through further training' (DBEc 2014:6). This link can be an incentive and motivation to learn a new teaching skill or approach (Hellemann 2017:81).

As part of the special needs curriculum, drama remains an untapped field in South Africa. Research projects such as the one explored in this paper show how important and

beneficial drama methods such as t-i-r can be in shifting the position of learners with barriers to learning in the classroom. As a creative teaching method, t-i-r offers practical and accessible ways of exploring themes and topics from higher grades, thus promoting a capability approach to learning. This proposed method allows special needs learners to participate in rigorous curricula with relevant and relatable materials. In this regard, they received a chance to develop and strengthen their problem-solving, communication and critical thinking skills from a practical instead of an abstract angle.

Through playmaking, the learners participated in a make-believe workplace world where they made choices and undertook responsibilities under the facilitation of a teacher-in-role. The project's success further showed the educational power of t-i-r as a tool for partnership. The partnership gave the learners a voice and shifted the teacher's complacency by making them relinquish power to the students. As Thompson (2003:31) stated, complacency does not serve the classroom space well, and it often happens when the teacher does not want to give their learners agency through participation. Heeding Freire's advocacy of a co-relational pedagogical practice, t-i-r has also been instrumental in challenging disability stigma. I hope this approach will steadily make its way into many South African special needs schools, thus bringing teachers and learners to a new point of interaction in the classroom.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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