

Drama and the SDA Church:

Appendix 28

DRAMA IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

Submitted by
Phyllis Bryan Paytee

General Conference Drama Guidelines Committee
January 1974

The moment the word “drama” is uttered, we find ourselves upon debatable ground. Both the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy urge that caution and restraint be exercised by the Christian who is tempted to participate in any activities of a sensational, theatrical nature, whether presented in the theatre or in our own institutions. At the same time, however, neither the Bible nor the Spirit of Prophecy offer direct condemnation of drama as a learning tool.

With respect to education, both references repeatedly suggest that a variety of teaching methods be employed in order to insure a maximal degree of interest and efficiency in the teaching-learning process. The greatest example in the history of Christian education is provided by the Master Teacher himself whose methods were constantly adapted to fit the individual and the occasion.

Yet, the question remains: Should the methodology of Seventh-day Adventist elementary teachers be expanded to include classroom drama? In viewing briefly the types of drama promoted in public education today, we note that both formal and informal productions are in popular use. Formal drama includes the children’s theatre where carefully finished, artistically produced plays or playlets and expressive renderings of dialogues from dramatic literature are presented. Informal drama, on the other hand, deals primarily with creative dramatics. This type of drama is represented by the play that is developed creatively by a group, as opposed to one that abides by a written script. The play may be simple or elaborate, but if it is creative drama, it must be improvised rather than written.

One immediately discerns the dangers inherent in each of these types of dramatics for children. The formal children’s theatre is audience-centered and the major emphasis is on the product rather than on the participants. In this setting, drama is a performing art which aims to develop in children an “appreciation for the magic and make-believe of the theatre.” Although creative drama is participant-centered, it has its pitfalls as well since it emphasizes “development of the imagination in a world of make-believe.” While Christian teachers do not believe a child’s imagination should be cultivated along the lines of magic and make-believe, we do recognize that the imagination is itself a God-given talent to be cultivated for His service.

The renowned French educator Jean Piaget has written extensively on the function of dramatic play in the intellectual and moral development of young children. He observes that drama is an activity in which young children frequently engage even without adult direction or support. This dramatic play occurs, he suggests, because children have a style of learning that fits their own level of maturity, and they use this innate learning style naturally and effectively. Ellen White must have understood the learning styles of children, for long before Piaget appeared on the educational scene, she advised:

Parents and teachers should aim so to cultivate the tendencies of the youth that at each stage of life they may represent the beauty appropriate to that period, unfolding naturally, as do the plants in the garden.—*Ed 107*

Educators for decades have acknowledged the fact that the learning style most natural to the elementary child is that of *learning by doing*. What the child reads, sees, and hears is very important, but what he *does* is more likely to penetrate his life and influence his way of behaving. A well-known Chinese proverb reinforces this principle:

I see and I remember,
I hear and I forget,
I *do* and I understand.

Although children's theater and creative dramatics cannot be embraced by the Christian teacher, one of the potentially productive facets of learning by doing which should receive greater attention is informal classroom drama. For the purposes of this discussion, we define informal classroom drama as a learning experience employing the use of simple dialogue and action with the optional use of simple costumes and scenic properties. Informal classroom drama is outlined and guided by the teacher in cooperation with the learners.

This definition is supported by an incident related in E. G. White Letter 5, 1888. The December 26 communication was written after Mrs. White attended a dramatized Christmas program presented by the Battle Creek Sabbath School. The children wore costumes. In fact, Ella M. White, Mrs. White's six-year-old granddaughter was in the program, dressed to typify an angel. Although Mrs. White counseled that some features of the program could have been more effective, she did not condemn the dramatized scenes. Instead, her letter included the following commendations: "I was pleased with the lighthouse. The part acted by the children was good. The reading was appropriate."

What values may be derived from an appropriate use of classroom drama today? Nellie McCaslin of Mills College of Education suggests that important permanent values may be gained from classroom drama when scenes are selected to advance creativity and aesthetic development, critical thinking, social growth and cooperation, improved communication skills, and moral and spiritual values.

Dr. McCaslin's list is an excellent one, but the primary reason for including drama in Seventh-day Adventist elementary schools is that of promoting "character formation...the most important object in education."—*CT 61* We have been instructed that "character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now."—*Ed 225*

The Spirit of Prophecy also indicates the sources from which the diligent study of character building may be obtained:

Source

(1) Bible — *Ed 17*

Examples

Episodes from the lives of

such Biblical characters as

Abraham
Daniel
David
Elijah
Joseph
Moses
Paul
Samuel

Episodes from

The Good Samaritan
The Lost Coin
The Loving Father
The Talents
The Wise and Foolish Virgins

(2) Nature — *FE 85*

Episodes in which someone explains such natural phenomena as

Changing seasons
Divine geometry of snowflakes
Flight of birds
How animals build homes
Making of a tree
Marvels of insect world
Treasures of the sea
Wonders of the heavens

(3) Denominational History — *CW 145*

Episodes from the lives of such early pioneers as

J. N. Andrews
Joseph Bates
G. H. Bell
John Byington
Hiram Edson
Kate Lindsay
Ellen G. White
James White

(4) Useful Work — *Ed 77*

Episodes which depict the varied talents required by such workers as

Carpenters
Colporteurs
Farmers

Foreign Missionaries
 Medical Doctors
 Ministers
 Pharmacists
 Publishers
 Research Scientists
 Teachers

(5) Life's Experiences — *Ed 77*

Episodes from such denominational
 publications as

Guide
 Mission Quarterly
 MV Program Kit
 Our Little Friend
 Primary Treasure
 Review & Herald
 Sabbath School Worker
 Treasury of Devotional Aids

As an elementary school child becomes a participant in selected episodes drawn from the foregoing sources, he learns in a very pleasant, natural manner to recognize a plan and purpose in all life, live at his best, accept and appreciate others, use his talents in service, understand how God works with men, and desire to follow Jesus.

Any dramatic scenes enacted in Seventh-day Adventist elementary schools should:

- (1) *Foster the twin purposes of Christian education—information and inspiration.* Classroom drama is not to be designed for mere amusement and pleasure.—*MYP 214, 371; PP 459, 460*
- (2) *Arise naturally from the unit of work being studied in order to extend knowledge.* Dramatization should not be planned for the sake of displaying the ability and proficiency of pupils, thus encouraging pride, self-esteem, and self-glorification.—*CSW 46*
- (3) *Be based on real situations or situations which could actually occur.* The unreal and sensational are to be avoided.—*4T 415, 653*
- (4) *Have a message worthy of being shared and remembered.* The schoolroom is no place for superficial,* surface work.—*Ed 278*
- (5) *Yield educational benefits commensurate with the time spent in preparation.* These benefits should strengthen the intellect and elevate

- the character.—*E.G. White Letter 5, 1888*
- (6) *Use simplicity in props and costuming.* Excessive time, money, and effort should not be expended for the sake of display.—*FE 253*

The elementary teacher who uses informal classroom drama as a vehicle for bringing to the instructional program new appreciations, insights, and understandings should select only those dramatic episodes which will meet a particular learning need. He should select materials having basic elements that are easy to outline and easy for boys and girls to transfer into simple action and dialogue. The teacher should also know the children and materials particularly well and try to put them together in the best possible way.

He will be thoroughly dedicated to the beliefs and ideals of the church and will exemplify these in his personal and professional life. He will be deeply concerned for the salvation of his boys and girls and will assist the children in every possible way to reach their God-given potential. He will exercise refined judgment and taste in his choice of episodes to be enacted, remembering that truth is best communicated in a setting of love, compassion, beauty, and simplicity.

Most of all, the teacher will believe in his calling and have faith in its value. He will have a strong sense of the direction in which he is guiding children, and know why he is guiding them that way.