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"If this is so fun for adults, it must be a thousand times more fun for children!"  
Adult teacher students experiences on grouping through drama course practices

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## ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning, grouping, flexibility in communication and transformational ways of learning play a very important role in today's learning environments. Future teachers need strong experience in grouping and in the mechanisms that lie beyond the ways people form groups. It is essential to make teacher students familiar with the methods of how to positively influence the atmosphere where pupils are forming groups, communicating and cooperating. Drama education has unique and very effective methods for successful grouping. This study reflects the meanings teacher students give on drama course practices influencing their experiences on grouping. The study was executed in Finland at the Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius. Drama education course is part of an adult students' teacher education programme and it takes place at the beginning of the studies of new courses. Through the drama education course the students dive into the variety of drama methods by experiencing these themselves and they authentically get to know how drama education creates at its best an amazing learning environment for grouping. This study aims to identify different authentic experiences that teacher students recounted for individual grouping experiences. Drama education forms a third reality among participants, it works on several levels and combines reality and fiction where students are free to let loose control and give space to creativity and spontaneity. As this happens, the ways students free themselves to cooperation, playful, joyful and limitless grouping have great importance for the whole grouping during their teacher studies. Furthermore, as they become teachers they need to know how to create a safe and effective space for true grouping among their pupils.

Keywords: Drama education, drama pedagogy

## Introduction

The community, safety and the feeling of belonging to the group create the foundation for learning in different communities. In the class teacher education it is important to be aware of these points and to facilitate the future teachers' ability to develop as cooperative pedagogues who have skills and knowledge about the processes of grouping. The objective is to educate teachers as experts of the skills of the 2000s and of the multidisciplinary, integrated and cooperative learning by organizing high quality and authentic teaching in their education. The students' own experience of the different approaches, methods and cooperation directs them as the expert pedagogues of the future.

In the teacher training drama education has its own important and significant place from the point of view of professional and pedagogical skills. By experiencing drama methods through their own experience, the multiform meaning of the drama education dawns on them as a tool for the group processes and for the individuals in joining the group. The students must acquire personal experience of the effectiveness of drama education so that they can form an understanding based on their own experiences on how to utilize drama education as a method. The methods of drama education are an excellent force in planning the learning situations from the points of views of both the educational as well as communal and individual learning. In this study the subject of interest is the effect of the drama education course on the grouping process. What are those forms which

bring about the experience of grouping and what kind of experiences and feelings of solidarity the students experience through shared drama practices.

**Method of implementation of the drama education course and the objectives** The central approach in the education is cooperative learning and small group work. Every year the studies are begun on average by 40 students in January and they are divided into groups A and B. During the education the students study in A and B groups and carry out learning tasks and teaching practices in the small groups. The cooperative approaches, grouping and social skills are central to the studies. The point of view of the adult education on learning is socio-pedagogical, in which the student is seen as a dynamic and active developer of their own operation (Kurki 2014), but also a socio-cultural one (Vygotsky 1978). At the core of education there is always the question of who the human being is and what their status is in the community, in which case the methods of supporting the individual's development in the communal relations and the methods of supporting the development of the community are essential in education (Kurki 2014). These matters emerge also in the adult education and the students' possibilities to reflect on themselves in relation to the community also strengthen their development as teachers.

The educational objective of the drama education course is to give students information and competence to use drama methods as a cross-disciplinary and comprehensive method. As a teacher-researcher, I am interested in how the participation in the drama education practices affect the students' experiences of being included in the group and grouping, the objective is thus to examine the unplanned consequences of the operation (Saarela-Kinnunen & Eskola 2015). Therefore the significance of the course may be a lot more than strengthening the professional skills and pedagogical qualification. I study the experiences which are related to a group and the community the course has given to the students.

Among the first course modules of the new course is Language and Literature, with a drama education course of two study credits. I taught the course of drama education to the class teacher students who had begun their studies in spring, 2015. I carried out the course so that I included a lot of grouping and cooperative drama exercises in the first times of assembly. I taught the drama education lessons separately to groups A and B, so there were 19 from the A-group and 21 from B at one time. When arriving to the course from different parts of Finland, the students meet in the situation where they end up in a near working relation with people previously unknown to them. Niemistö (2007) considers it natural the fact that when a new group begins the grouping process, its members are on their guard. The students are required to possess good grouping skills and an ability for flexibility and for cooperative learning. With experience it is possible for the class teacher students to identify with the pupils when they guide them towards the cooperative approaches. The objective of the drama course is, in addition to other areas, to facilitate the students' grouping process and in it the role of the supervisor is important, as Niemistö (2007, 80) also states; it is the task of the supervisor to take care of the orientation of the members of the group to the task, to the environment as well as to the members joining in the group. In the the adult students' mutual interaction a social driving force is created (Poikela & Poikela 2014) and it is important and particularly natural to harness this with the help of drama methods to facilitate students' development.

The exercises of the first assembly times included introducing, interaction, group operation and cooperation exercises and exercises which encourage expression as a group. The learning task was to keep a learning diary of the thoughts, experiences and the matters the students found significant and that were brought on by the drama education lessons. Drama is always operation (Spolin 1963; Neelands 1990; Østern 200; cf. Kurki 2014) and in operation a human being commits themselves through choice and freedom to experiencing originating from one's own persona, to experiencing which is voluntary and takes place according to the individual's own possibilities. Studying in the close-knit groups and small groups models cooperative learning which has been raised as a central learning method in the new core curriculum of the basic education in Finland (2014). Learning the civic skills of the 2000s is made possible by offering the pupils cooperative and authentic learning situations. The significance of directing interaction and joint problem solving

and operation as a group is emphasized and strengthened. In our education we want to give the teacher students a firm model of the possibilities of cooperative learning and to educate the future teachers to become skillful professionals of interactive learning and cooperation but also active, reflecting and committed developers of their own operation (the curriculum of the class teachers adult education programme 2014-2017).

### **The two worlds of drama**

The objective of the drama education course is also to give students methods and understanding of the possibilities of drama education as a tool for learning. I have planned the teaching so that the course consists concretely of drama methods, drama exercises and of shared throwing oneself into the drama education by doing and experiencing all the exercises and by creating something new together: drama contents. Drama education is an art form which requires an applicable and functional artistic form in order to create meaning (Fleming 1997, 2001). Teaching the methods of drama education creates a possibility for the students to adopt the required skills. It is important in all teaching, in spite of the learning objectives, to retain sensitivity for the awareness of how the participants commit themselves and respond to the context. It is particularly significant in drama learning. In this sensitive state in which the techniques of the drama education can be used to create the fictional world, the communal experience which is always unique and indeterminable in advance is created. Brian Way (1967) stresses that to be able to internalize the experience of another human being, for example, of feeling good and the basic interdependence between people, one must at first personally experience this. Therefore it is essential that the teacher student experiences a personal process. The creative operation helps a human being to develop the ability to empathize with the help of the imagination. In the dramatic operation a shared reality materializes or is created, the simultaneous presence of the two worlds (metaxu) which is made possible as a sum of the dreams and objectives of the common consciousness shared by the persons. Niemi (2014) characterizes a socio-pedagogical theory of operation so that the whole existence of a human being is operation (praxis) (see Østern, 2001), interaction between thinking and operation.

The students surrender to the drama methods, they participate and experience the effect of the methods authentically and personally. In this way their experiences of the effect of drama education are based on authentic and genuine personal experience. This is a very important experience, in order for the student to get an understanding of how drama education can be used to promote the pupils' learning objectives but also the grouping, the feeling of solidarity and cooperative skills through creativity.

### **Social play - grouping in drama education**

Grouping requires social interaction. Social interaction, such as Judy Gagahan (1975) has already stated, depends on the communication which takes place verbally as well as non-verbally. In the drama exercises the messages transmitted through the body language are in the role that has been consciously emphasized. In the group process, from the level of the linguistic communication the area of emphasized non-verbal communication is reached when the participants are able to undress the culturally bound common norms which regulate speech and behavior (Gagahan 1975), and the permission is given to move themselves through the playfulness of the drama agreement together to the area of strengthened communication, where one's presence is emphasized bodily and let loose, free from the norms.

Moreno (1947) has presented spontaneity as a state in which the mind of the human being is exceptionally free and according to him, spontaneity increases in the interaction, when the shared illusion is agreed upon. With this he means a state in which the participants are ready to create and experience new matters. The shared illusion is a state which aptly describes the level of the social interaction which, at its best, prevails in the groups during the drama exercises.

The sociocultural view of learning emphasizes the contextual significance of the society and culture for learning (Vygotsky 1978; Heikkinen 2007) and emphasizes the situation-specificity of learning and the individual starting points in relation to the expectations and demands of the environment. The students must get a personal experience of the effectiveness of drama education so that they

can form an understanding based on their own experiences of why to utilize drama education as a method. The drama education itself is meanings, feelings and creating experiences (Heikkinen 2007; Ostern 2001; Way 1967; Spolin 1963) sufficient already as such, but in the teacher education in the drama education lessons there is a conscious objective to give students an opportunity to experience the effectiveness of the methods of drama education to secure the development of the pedagogical approach. The methods of drama education function naturally in carrying out the multidisciplinary learning modules and in developing the pupils' cross-disciplinary skills. The playfulness of drama makes possible the operation on the fictional level where the imagination directs the reality, free of linearity and of binding rules (cf. Vygotski; Heikkinen 2007; Neelands 1990) and also offers an adult a possibility to create a culture which belongs to everybody and to break the rules (Heikkinen 2007, 57.) Heikkinen describes aptly how in the drama situation participants join and immerse themselves fully in a way characteristic to play in the fictional situation to be created together. This fictional situation is formed by the individuals' desire to throw oneself into examining the world in a role and as own selves, as together and as individuals. The successful drama experience requires the participants' commitment to mutual agreement, emphasizes Heikkinen (2007) and calls this aesthetic doubling. Only by participating fully in the drama, aesthetic doubling can take place and that again requires, according to Heikkinen (2007), the here and now –energy, full presence and concentration in the situation and the group at hand. This kind of energy creates the excellent precondition for genuine grouping and the same also holds true in cooperative approaches. This requires the understanding of how one's own participation affects the group and how the group in turn affects oneself. The respect for the mutual drama agreements directs to the cooperative approaches. Drama operates on two levels, the reality is present but the fictional world is lived in in drama, so the participant is present at two levels and this brings a special addition to the experience of operating in the group. At the fictional level of the drama the participant surrenders to the play and throws oneself into the creation of the shared imagined reality in different roles and the experiences are strong in a creative state. These strengthen the feeling of solidarity and promote positive grouping. The characterization of Heikkinen can be condensed so that the drama education is social play which is directed by the commitment to the agreement of the shared drama play and this creates a shared aesthetic experience which can be funny as well as serious and playful as well as analytical (2007, 76-83).

The shared drama activity makes simultaneously possible the shared expression and individual experience, it increases the individual's consciousness of themselves but at the same time the sensitivity and consciousness of other people and of their actions increases (Spolin 1963; Way 1967). In this terrain the preconditions for grouping are favourable because much the same principles determine the success of the operation as in the cooperative learning. According to Leppilampi (2002), cooperative learning is the social construction which supports independence and liberation of learning and the core of which is in the development of the positive mutual dependence. That is in turn made possible when the students observe at the level of emotions that they have joined together in order to perform a task. In cooperative learning interactive communication, individual responsibility, constant practice of social skills and shared reflection of matters are central in addition to the previously stated (Johnson & Johnson 1989; Kagan 1994).

Drama exercises make possible the materialization of the creative illusion because the strong aesthetic doubling strengthens the presence and the shared experience. This commitment creates a safe circle through mutual drama agreements (cf. cooperative learning) and facilitates the increase in the spontaneity because the strength of interaction is emphasized especially in non-verbal ways. Spontaneous, as Spolin (1963) expresses the matter, is a moment in which we experience our person's freedom when meeting a reality; it is the state of finding, experiencing and creative expression. In this way the process of grouping begins in quite a special way.

## **Research methods**

The study is an action research where the researcher is the implementor of the operation and studies the participants' experiences of the effect of the operation by interpreting their diary notes. The action research is situation bound because the pedagogical practices and learning situations



are bound to the context and created by the researcher (Carr & Kemmins 1986; Stringer 2007). The research method is a case study in which the researcher is a part of the study process. The material is narrative in quality, narrative description (Heikkinen 2015) and consists of the diary entries produced by the students during the drama education studies. Thus the method of analyzing the material is the narrative analysis (Polkinghorne 1995). In the analysis of the material I have used the coding method when interpreting the students' diary notes. The material has been collected in the spring of 2015. The research material consists of the learning diaries written by the students and I have picked from them all mention of grouping experienced by the students and the experience of community. From the diary material I have brought out those of the students' notes which answer the study questions: what personal experiences has the student experienced in connection to the grouping and in belonging to the group?

Based on the theories of drama education and cooperative learning, I have looked with the help of code words for the descriptions from the students' entries on how operating in the group in drama education exercises has affected them. I used the following as code words: experiencing fun in the group, aesthetic experience in the group, social significance in a group, encouragement in a group, emphasis on the significance of the rules in the group. In this way the coding method also describes that world and reality in which I have carried out this study (Rantala 2015). I try to focus the existing concepts through an inductive approach (Rantala 2015).

I organized these experiences into tables by utilizing the theses of the serious playfulness of drama education by Heikkinen (2007) and the principles of cooperative learning and found five categories in the students' answers. I numbered every entry picked up from the diary with running numbers 1-33 according to every interviewee. I analyzed the interdependence of the notes to one another and classified the answers in to categories. Carrying out the learning task wasn't required of everybody who had participated in the course. I took into consideration the frame of reference of answers and in which connection it was mentioned.

### Five categories

On the basis of classification I found the following five categories: (1) Experience of the aesthetic doubling (metaxis, cf. Boal & Bolton) in which throwing oneself into the here and now -energy is central and the understanding which has strengthened through this experience of one's own ability to function as a member of the group. (2) Serious playfulness and the agreement of playfulness which belongs to it (cf. the rules of the game, Spolin 1966, 4-6). The student regards the group experience which has taken place through following a mutual agreement as significant. (3) Artistic and aesthetic experience where learning new things by experiencing, interpreting and through wonder with the group has been significant (cf. group expression, Spolin, 9-12). (4) Fun of the drama education and experience of playfulness acquired in the group, that the goal of the shared work is the happily indifferent, light-headed joyful atmosphere creating the experience of the

solidarity, and as the fifth (5) the social play, the opening of the level of paying attention to others, activity and questioning.

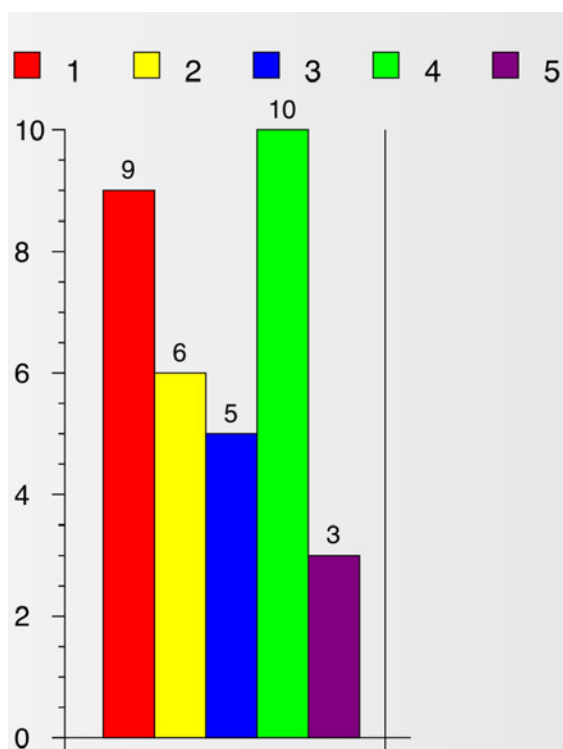


Table 1. Experiences mentioned by the students during drama education lessons of the significance of a group or community for one's own expression or operation as well as for the experience of grouping. ©Sirkkulähdelmäki

Drama education is a learning environment in which the operation takes place on the merging surface of the real and fictional world in a social context with one another, sharing and building a shared reality and experience. Experiential learning (Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984) is a natural method in drama education; operating together is based on the experiences which are created and are taken forward through mutual agreements (Heikkinen 2007). Drama education is also cooperative because the qualities of every participant are utilized and the development of social skills is continuously an objective through operating in the roles. An objective is also to find a shared serious playfulness, in which case the drama process creates an affirmative mutual dependence.

### Analyzing the results

The experience of throwing oneself into the here and now -energy of the aesthetic doubling (9/33) and experiencing fun (10/33) rose together to be the strongest experiences which promote grouping and solidarity. This supports the idea that drama education provides a special opportunity to promote grouping, just because drama as an art form creates the possibility of a presence of a shared illusion, serious playfulness and two realities (cf. Moreno 1947; Heikkinen, 2007; Spolin 1963).

In the experience of the aesthetic doubling, the encouraging and safe atmosphere of the group, hiding behind the role and putting oneself into a role playing someone were emphasized as the factors which helped the students to throw themselves into drama and to feel liberated to create something new in the group (8/33).

*"It was extremely liberating to notice that in the safe "limited" company also I am able to throw myself into again and to enjoy working together ... it is good even as an adult to break way from oneself" (22).*

The diary entries which settled in the "Serious playfulness and the agreement of playfulness" - category included the experience of the fact that the rules of the play and the mutual agreements create the safe frame in which one can operate. The students' experiences that others are accepted, and they are neither embarrassed nor judged, refer to the fact that the rules of the exercises create the feeling of safety and help the student to join in with the activity. The basic idea of improvisation exercises is that all the ideas and all the participants are accepted as they are, that *no* is not said (Boal 2002). Also in the cooperative learning the shared rules are important and create trust among the group (Leppilampi 2002).

In the artistic-aesthetic experience -category, the experience of how the interaction in the group was significant and how the communication on different levels and the shared experience that was created through it were emphasized. A descriptive sentence was one student's observation of being able to feel being part of the group otherwise than through the common language. Non-verbal communication (Gagahan 1975) and the interaction which takes place on many levels

created the experience of inclusion in the group. This was also supported by a meaning brought up by another student, one was allowed to express oneself verbally as well as wordlessly.

*"Just a great experience to sing rounds with the whole group, to get the same feeling in the class that I got from this, even though I'm not musical at all (20)".*

In the "fun" – experience category, the experience of pure fun from throwing oneself into and thus together creating a strong experience of fun and joy. Laughing and experiencing together something unique through creativity was regarded as liberating, relaxing and empowering.

*"It was wonderful to be allowed to invent our completely own story together, oh the enthusiasm! It was wonderful to notice how laughter and good feeling liberate and give different energy. (17)".*

The students who found the social play -experience significant had realized how the interactive play taking place in the group, in other words, the social play, is constructed from paying attention to others, observing and shared experience. The drama exercises always include that level where one has to be really conscious of the operation of others so that the shared experience can go forward, a responsibility for oneself has to be taken as well as for the group in this way also in cooperative learning (cf. Heikkinen, 2007; Johnson & Johnson 1989.)

The significance of the drama education course is significant for a student on a personal level. Participation and the genuinely putting oneself on the line opens the student's own expression as well as strengthens the experience of being included in the group and intensifies the community of the students. The students who had only recently met one another reached a strong sense of solidarity and experience of grouping. In the light of the shared and, at the same time, individual experience, the multiform significance of the drama education as a tool for grouping processes and an individual joining the group becomes apparent to them.

*"I do not quite understand what has happened to me here in such a short time but I understand that all of this takes me towards the shining teacher professionalism " (1).*

It was also noticeable that the personal participation in drama education and the liberation experienced by the students were genuine and, to many, a surprising experience. The ability to separate from their own everyday self really surprised many students and awakened the feelings of joy, happiness and liberation. In this context the students regarded a safe and trustworthy atmosphere and the experience of being included in the group as important. "Nobody was laughed at" - was a significant experience in the group. This significance has been understood by Way (1967) already when stating that the confidence of a human being in oneself develops by working in a really uncritical atmosphere, without the fear of failure and comparison with other people.

The state of shared illusion (Moreno 1947) can be reached through drama. The students had reached the state of shared illusion in which the courage to throw oneself into drama with the group they had got to know through the introduction games strengthened and liberated them to create together.

Likewise the playfulness of drama, in other words, the fictional state increased the feeling of solidarity and increased courage to participate. The students reached the state of spontaneity described by Spolin (1963) and were encouraged to throw themselves into the group, were liberated to create, to laugh, to fool around and to reveal themselves, the state of shared illusion had been created together but it also contained the agreement of playfulness defined by Heikkinen (2004); an acceptance. The drama exercises were strengthening and functioning methods in starting and deepening the process of grouping but also functioned as a channel for freeing the creativity of an individual.

*"As a stolid and stiff woman it is usually really difficult for me to throw myself into to join the expression but now it was suddenly easy and natural. And extremely funny!" (8).*

Drama education is a versatile and multi-level method for broadening the adult students' world of experience and their self-understanding. At the beginning stage of the studies the drama education



course is an excellent opportunity to shake the students from the feeling of separation and unfamiliarity to the feelings of familiarity and confidence. The method also serves at different levels in opening the student's understanding and their eyes in relation to the teacher's professionalism and realizing the pedagogical methods. In the grouping process the students reached the level where they had the feeling of safety to throw themselves into drama together. Likewise they felt solidarity and the desire to create something together. Through an aesthetic experience they got the experience of the multi-level communication between people, fearlessness to be themselves and to throw themselves into a role because they did not need to be afraid of being embarrassed. Above all, the students got the experience that they were encouraged and achieved more in the group than they had believed of themselves. This is just the case in the playfulness of drama described by Heikkinen (2007) and the state of shared illusion (Moreno 1947). The social driving force described by Poikela & Poikela (2014) was created in the interaction. The adult education needs such fine methods to lead the students to experience personally the grouping process, the feeling of solidarity and to discover its significance. In that way the socio-pedagogical point of view (Kurki 2014) of the students who develop themselves becomes real. An interesting study subject would indeed be to find out how the recently graduated students utilize drama methods in the grouping processes of a new class when they move to working life.

*"In our group we laughed with tears in our eyes ...if this is this much fun in the adults' opinion, it will be that for children a thousand times more!" (8).*

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