Dramatizing physical education: using drama in research

Hayley Fitzgerald, Carnegie Faculty of Sport & Education, Headingley Campus, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds, West Yorkshire, LS6 3QS, UK (E-mail: h.fitzgerald@leedsmet.ac.uk)

Accessible summary	
	• Using drama in research means people who communicate in different ways can take part in research. Drama was used to find out what students do in school PE and their free-time.
	• Students from a special school agreed to take part in the drama session. Two drama workers ran the session.
	• A video recorder was used to help remember what happened during the drama session.
	• A report was written about the drama session and presentations made to people working in schools, social services and sport.

Abstract

In this paper I continue to develop the growing interest in working with research approaches that enable people experiencing severe learning disabilities to participate in research activities. In particular, I discuss a research project that adopted a number of data generation strategies, including a drama pilot project. In this paper I focus on the drama pilot project by reviewing the processes involved in working with drama as a research approach. In reflecting upon the use of drama I explore a number of issues concerning the process of transcription and the competing discourses of research and engaging in a creative performance. Although I identify a number of challenges encountered in this drama pilot I would argue that this technique remains a worthwhile and relevant strategy for engaging with many students, including those experiencing severe learning disabilities.

Keywords   *Drama research, learning disability, physical education*

Introduction

There is growing recognition that gaining the views of young people are crucial for understanding issues that affect their lives. In this context, young disabled people are increasingly seen as active social agents who are able to articulate their own experiences and express their views (Davis & Watson 2002). This shift in thinking has brought, and will continue to bring, new methodological challenges and opportunities for researchers (Chappell 2000; Christensen & James 2000). Indeed, a recent edition of the *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* provided some valuable insights into the ways in which researchers are attempting to address these challenges and also considered the possibilities and limitations of various methodologies (Porter & Lewis 2004). In this paper, I continue to develop dialogue in this area by focusing on the use of drama as a participatory research technique for working with young

people experiencing severe learning disabilities to co-construct experiences of physical education, sport and free-time activities. I draw on my experience of planning and developing a drama pilot project; as such this paper is exploratory and considers some of the challenges and opportunities this emergent data generation strategy brings. It is not my intention in this paper to review in detail the findings from the drama pilot project. Instead, I explore a number of methodological issues arising from using drama as a strategy for generating data. First, I consider the ways in which drama has already been used within research. After this, I review the key stages in the planning and development of the drama pilot project. Consideration is then briefly given to the key findings from the drama pilot project. Finally, I reflect upon the usefulness and value of this emergent technique for eliciting the insights of young disabled people about their physical education, sporting and free-time experiences. In particular, I explore issues emerging from the process of transcription and the competing discourses of research and creative performance.

Using drama within research

Drama is just one of a number of innovative research techniques that are increasingly been used to engage young people within research (Christensen & James 2000). Researchers that choose to use drama usually do so in two key dimensions of the research process. First, some researchers use drama as a strategy for presenting data generated (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer 1995). It has been suggested that presenting research in this way enables the audience to '…. access and consider deeper levels of meaning' (Lawrence & Mealman 2000). In some instances, drama professionals facilitate this process and are the performers of the production (Chapman *et al.* 2003). On other occasions, drama professionals act as facilitators in order to support research participants to be the performers (DIY Theatre Company & Goodley, 1999).

In addition to using drama to re-present data generated some researchers have used drama as an interactive form of data generation (Barnardo's, 2001; Norris 2000; Taylor 1998). In this context, the research process often becomes much more than the generation of data and may also challenge oppressive aspects of society (Boal 1998). For example, techniques associated with 'Forum theatre' (see for example Day 2002 and Franklin 2001) can be used to simulate active exchanges between drama facilitators and the audience (research participants). The data generated, then, becomes the engagements between the drama facilitators and research participants. Although this drama pilot project did not use Forum theatre, I draw on the principle that drama can be used as a vehicle to gain understandings and insights from young people. In the case of this pilot, we sought to gain a better understanding of disabled students' physical education, sport and free-time experiences.

Research context

The drama pilot project reviewed in this paper was undertaken as part of a larger research project (Fitzgerald & Kay 2004). Following Davis & Watson (2002) and Priestley (1999) this research challenges traditional views of young disabled people that positions them as illegitimate sources of research information. Instead, this research situates young disabled people as active social agents who have valuable insights and opinions that should be captured in research. Within the larger research project four forms of data generation were undertaken including student questionnaires, student focus group discussions, expert interviews and a drama pilot project.

The drama pilot project was undertaken at one special school located within the county area that the larger research project was conducted. Two professional drama facilitators working for a locally based arts group collaborated with the researcher and school physical education teacher to develop and plan the drama pilot. Ten young people identified by the teacher as experiencing severe learning disabilities participated in the session. Parents consented to their child's involvement in the session. In addition, on several occasions prior to and during the drama session students were given opportunities to opt out. Students were supported by three Support Assistants and the physical education teacher. At the end of the drama session these members of staff, along with the students, were invited to share their views about the drama pilot they had experienced. According to the liaising teacher, five of the students communicated using 'a limited verbal vocabulary' and the teacher anticipated these students would respond in short sentences to the drama activities. Three of the students communicated using Makaton and two students communicated using other movement and gestures.

According to O'Kane '… the successful use of participatory techniques lies in the process, rather than simply the techniques used' (O'Kane 2002, p. 138). With these sentiments in mind, I attempted to ensure that extensive consideration and planning was given to the development of this drama pilot prior to, during and after the delivery of the drama session. The key stages in this planning process are summarized in Fig. 1.

The drama session

The drama session was divided into six key areas.
1. Introductory activities aimed at encouraging and developing dialogue between students, support staff and the two drama facilitators. These activities included individual and
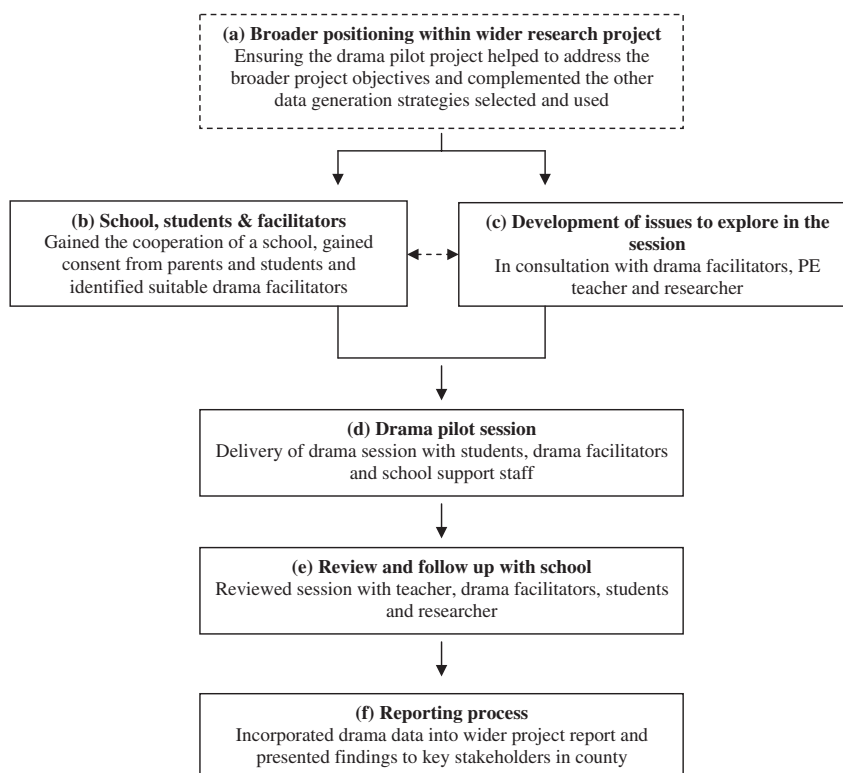
Figure 1 Key stages in the planning and development of the drama project.

group activities and enabled the drama facilitators to draw the participants attention to issues relating to physical education, sport and free-time.

2. Theme 1 – School physical education: In this part in the session participants were encouraged to 'act out' and talk[1] about the activities they remembered undertaking in physical education lessons. After this, students were encouraged to identify their favourite physical education activity.

3. Theme 2 – Free-time activities: Following on from the previous theme students were encouraged to consider their free-time experiences. Students were encouraged to identify their favourite free-time activities.

4. Theme 3 – Going to a sports centre: This part of the drama session focused on using the principles of forum theatre to explore the issues and barriers faced by disabled students who want to participate in sport in community settings. The participants were shown a short play in which one drama facilitator experienced problems accessing a local sports centre. When the play was repeated participants were invited to direct the facilitator in ways that may help to overcome the situation experienced by the facilitator.

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[1]In this context I use the terms 'talk' and 'say' to refer to any exchanges or engagement between participants.

5. At the end of the session the facilitators recapped on what activities had been undertaken and encouraged participants, Support Assistants and the physical education teacher to share their thoughts about the session.

6. Review and follow-up with school: Immediately following the drama session informal discussions took place with the physical education teacher, drama facilitators and researcher. The school was also sent a video of the drama session.

The data generated from the drama session were incorporated into a report relating to the wider research project. In addition, the findings from the research were presented at a number of county-wide workshops. Following discussions about the findings the representatives participating in the workshop (from sport, education, social services and the voluntary sector) were asked to identify key actions to be taken in response to the recommendations of the report.

Drama research findings

It is clear from the data generated that using drama as a research strategy enabled new insights to be gained about the physical education, sport and free-time experiences of the students that participated in this drama pilot project. In particular, a number of issues emerged including:

- Students recognized physical education activities as part of the school curriculum.

- Students undertook limited active based free-time activities.
- Students identified family members as significant facilitators of free-time experiences.
- Students recognized they often needed support from others, including teachers and support staff in order to access free-time activity opportunities.

These data suggest that the participating students have limited opportunities to experience an active lifestyle beyond a school context. Therefore, for these young people critical questions need to be asked about the usefulness and relevance of physical education within and beyond the school setting and the extent to which community providers are considering and accounting for the needs of the young people in this study.

Reflecting upon the drama pilot project

When reflecting upon using drama with students experiencing severe learning disabilities a number of issues emerged including the 'inclusiveness' of the drama pilot, the role of the researcher, the student and school experience, the process of transcription and a discourse of research verses creative performance. In the following discussion I confine my focus to the latter two issues.

The process of transcription – capturing voice and movement

During the drama pilot session interactions were recorded using a video recorder. It was felt the recording would serve two purposes. First, the video would provide the school and students with a reminder of the activities they had undertaken with the drama facilitators. Secondly, from a research perspective this approach would enable detailed and repeated 'retrospective analysis' of the data generated that would not be possible using other forms of recording (Edwards & Westgate 1987). Following Collier & Collier (1986) I transcribed the verbal and visual aspects of the video recording simultaneously. Undertaking the transcription in this way was particularly important in this pilot project given that students communicated through a variety of means. Unlike conventional research I wanted to recognize, value and include a breadth of responses (Stalker, 1998). I noted which student, facilitator or Support Assistant was engaging and what response was given (verbal response, signing through a Support Assistant or movement). I also recorded if this response stimulated responses of other students, Support Assistants or facilitators. In addition, where relevant, I recorded further observations relating to the manner of individual participants responses and actions. I also noted additional contextual information about specific aspects of the pilot session. Table 1 below illustrates a short segment of the transcript and the format in which data were transcribed.

Although this segment is only part of the response given by students it serves to illustrate the complex nature of the transcription process and the kinds of non-verbal insights that can be gained from transcribing the drama pilot session in this way. This approach seemed to be particularly useful for capturing non-verbal responses from the three students who did not verbally communicate. For example, Table 1 illustrates how Kate finds expression through movement by joining Richard and demonstrating 'running'. This exchange also shows how the students were able to make alliances and collaborate with each other in order to express themselves in a meaningful way. Indeed, throughout the transcript it was evident that student responses were key stimuli for other students to follow-up through movement, gestures or verbal responses.

The movements of students also stimulated responses from the drama facilitators. Table 2 follows a request by Facilitator (2) for students to demonstrate their favourite free-time activity.

In this segment, the facilitator reciprocates the movements made by Kate and in this way attempts to verify that Kate's actions are those related to swimming. The observation column records that Kate responds in a way that would suggest she had changed from 'back stroke' to 'front crawl'. This example is one of many that illustrate the value of considering the responses of students in relation to other student and facilitator responses and also the subsequent movement responses of students. In combination, each of these dimensions could be re-presented through the transcript and when considered in this way serves to confirm the nature of Kate's actions.

In the context of non-verbal responses I recognize the requests of the facilitators and observations may not always represent what the participating students were attempting to convey. Indeed, on a number of occasions the students gestures or verbalization of 'no' provided a clear indication that the facilitators had not understood the responses given by students. In some instances, it was the Support Assistants that had to intervene and provide guidance to the facilitators regarding the students' responses. However, on a few occasions neither the facilitators nor Support Assistants were able to decipher student responses.

In Table 3 James' kicking and punching actions could not be distinguished. Even after support from experienced teachers of students experiencing severe learning disabilities it was still difficult to interpret the responses of some students. As illustrated in Table 3 these kinds of actions can be represented in the transcription but cannot be understood in a meaningful way. Clearly, the use of drama and the process of transcription are not without limitations and there was sometimes uncertainly and some imprecision when re-presenting the pilot drama session through

Table 1 Format of the transcript

Respondent	Response given	Nature of response	Response stimulated by others	Observations
John	'Football, I like football' (R1)	Verbal response		John is the first to respond and does so immediately following the facilitators question
Jane	[the verbal response and gestures seen through the video were unclear] (R1)	Verbal and gestures	Support Assistant (3) (See R2)	The Support Assistant bends down closely to Jane (in her wheelchair) and Jane makes some purposeful hand movements
Support Assistant (3)	'Jane says she likes PE when we play with colourful balloons' (R2)	Verbal response		When verbalizing her response SA (3) ensures she gets the attention of Facilitator (1) who nods to acknowledge the response.
Richard	'Running' (R3)	Signed response	Support Assistant and James respond while Richard demonstrates (See R4 below)	Richard runs around two other students to demonstrate his running Kate also starts running with Richard. She does not say or sign any responses at this time
Support Assistant (1)	'Richard, yes he says he likes running in PE lessons'. 'Good, running' (R4)	Verbal response Signed & verbal response		Response directed towards Richard
James	'I like running' (R4)	Verbal response	Support Assistant 2 responds to James (See R6 below)	James points with his hand over to the play ground
Facilitator (1)	'Oh yes I can see you two like running' (R5)		Facilitator (1) responds to Richard and Kate running	Facilitator (1) moves his arms in a running action
Support Assistant (2)	'Yes James, you run over there don't you' (R6)	Verbal response		James nods his head and continues to point to the play ground

The number after the 'R' signifies the specific timing of the response and where numbers are repeated this indicates simultaneous responses.

Table 2 Favourite free-time activities

Respondent	Response given	Nature of response	Response stimulated by others	Observations
Facilitator (2)	'Let me see, what are you doing then? You look like you're having a good time. Are you swimming? Lets see, can you swim in another way?' (R46)	Verbal response	Facilitator (2) responds to Kate's movement	Kate lies on her back and quickly moves her legs. (See R44) Facilitator (2) follows Kate's movements Kate turns over onto her stomach and moves her legs and arms – front crawl? (See R47)

Table 3 Deciphering responses

Respondent	Response given	Nature of response	Response stimulated by others	Observations
James	'I like it' (R21)	Verbal response	Facilitator (1) responds to James (See R22)	James repeatedly kicks his left foot high. He then does the same with his right leg. At the same time, he punches into the air simultaneously with both hands
Facilitator (1)	'I like what you're doing James. That could be, is it a high football kick?' (R22)	Verbal response	Steve runs over to Facilitator (1) (See R25)	James continues kicking and punching
Support Assistant (2)	'Is it football James?' (R23)	Verbal response	Clare laughs at James (See R24)	James does not acknowledge the Support Assistant, stops kicking and walks over to Clare. (See R25)
Support Assistant (2)	'Is it football James?' (R24)	Signed & verbal response		James continues the kicking and punching actions. Clare watches James, laughs and James stops kicking

transcription. That said other traditional methods of data generation have done little to embrace the different ways people experiencing learning disabilities communicate (Atkinson 2004). This drama pilot perhaps then signals the research possibilities when attention is given to the diverse communication *abilities* of students rather than giving priority to research methods merely relying on verbal exchanges.

It was evident from the transcription that although the Support Assistants were not asked to express their views and opinions that they were actively advocating on behalf of the participating students. As the drama facilitators were external practitioners to the school they only had a limited familiarity with the students. In this context, the school played an important intermediary role between the students and drama facilitators. Following Groves *et al.* (1999) I acknowledge this process may open up the possibilities of Support Assistant influenced or interpreted views rather than generating those from the young people themselves. However, without this kind of support and in particular drawing on the Support Assistants day-to-day familiarly of the students' communication preferences it is difficult to see how the drama pilot project could have effectively included all the students. Having explored the challenges and opportunities of the transcription process I now move on by considering another key issue relating to the tensions between conducting research and the performative nature of this drama pilot project.

Tensions between research and creative performance

Typically, within the research process researchers play a pivotal role in planning and conducting research. However participatory research, to some degree, disrupts this norm by placing more emphasis on the role of research participants within this process (Christensen & James 2000). Similarly, during the delivery of this drama pilot I found my role, as researcher, was marginal rather than one of active information seeker. Although I was involved in the development and planning of the drama session, outlined in Fig. 1a, b & c, I was not actively involved in the delivery. My role was one of videoer and at times I found it difficult to take on this relatively passive role. During the drama session itself, there was a clear division of labour between the drama facilitators and myself. This was premised on an understanding that we were practitioners with different areas of expertise and would utilize our skills and knowledge accordingly during different stages of the drama pilot project.

At times though, there was a tension between the drama facilitators' role and myself as the researcher. This was particularly the case in relation to a number of engagements

between the drama facilitators and students where I wanted to probe or ask additional follow-up questions. For example, theme two of the drama pilot focused on 'free-time' activities and the exchanges between the drama facilitators and students ultimately enabled a list of free-time activities to be compiled, favourites to be identities and some understanding was gained about 'who' the students undertook free-time activities with. As I was carrying out my role recording the session I was sometimes aware that not all students were given opportunities to respond with their insights. As a researcher engaging with a group of students, perhaps in a focus group situation, I would have been particularly attentive to this issue and attempted to facilitate discussions with all students. However, the drama facilitators seemed less concerned with keeping track of the responses and data than they were with the creative performance they were facilitating. Given the pilot nature of this research project it is perhaps not surprising that some tensions emerged between the drama facilitators and me. In future sessions, after additional specialist training, it may be worth taking on a more peripheral but active role during the delivery of similar drama sessions. Adopting this position would then open up the possibilities that I could probe and ask follow-up questions. In addition, prior to the delivery of a drama session consideration could be given to more 'researcher' development work with the drama facilitators. In this way, the drama facilitators themselves may become aware of the research driven motives underpinning such drama sessions and the ways in which they could add value to the research process.

As I have already indicated, participatory research may marginalize the role of the researcher within the research process. In part, this kind of positioning has contributed to concerns about participatory research and the 'quality' of data generated (Lewis & Lindsay 1999). Such concerns are premised on a methodological discourse that requires research to be systematic and grounded within parameters that demonstrate, amongst other things, reliability and validity (Miles & Huberman 1994). From this perspective, the creative spontaneity and emphasis on performance found in this drama pilot project may be seen as a breech of systematic rigor. On this issue, I support the thinking of Stalker (1998) who argues that viewing research in this way is disablist and fails to recognize the circumstances of researching issues relating to disability. Although I have already acknowledged some limitations to the drama pilot in relation to what I perceived to be the drama facilitators 'missed opportunities' to probe for further information from students. I would argue that this loss is in fact minimal and must be weighed against the insights and understandings this drama pilot project actually gained. As I have argued elsewhere (Fitzgerald & Jobling 2004), when research actively includes students it is essential that it is guided by the notion of authenticity (Lincoln & Guba 2000). In this

research I attempted to work towards this goal by working *in situ* with the students, in a place they were familiar with and may be able to associate with physical education experiences. In addition, the research recognized and drew on a range of communication systems and was not restricted to merely verbal responses. Furthermore, the drama pilot provided a space for self-expression and set no limits on how students engaged with each other and the drama facilitators. By working in this way I would suggest the data generated becomes far more useful and relevant than attempting to research within the constraints of more conventional approaches to data generation that would exclude rather than enable.

Conclusion

In this paper I consider the use of drama as a data generation strategy for including students experiencing severe learning disabilities within research. In general, I found drama to be a useful technique for engaging with the participating students in this drama pilot project. Having said this, I recognize that there were a number of challenges to using this approach to data generation. In particular, the process of transcription was complex and at times some student responses could not be clearly re-presented in the transcription. In addition, there seemed to be a tension between the goals of the drama facilitators and those of myself as a researcher. Furthermore, as a non-conventional approach to data generation some commentators may question the robustness of the data generated. Having explored each of these issues in this paper I believe that continued and extended dialogue is needed in order that the possibilities of drama as research continues to be explored as a potentially viable and inclusive approach to research.

Acknowledgement

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