

# Teacher in Role

## Through Teacher in Role you can:

- **start the drama**

For example, the children meet a character (played by the teacher) who gives them information that immediately arouses the children's curiosity, gives rise to questions and opens up the fiction. (*Unit 1, Activity 6*)

- **deepen the drama**

For example, the Teacher in Role challenges and questions the pupils as fellow participants within the unfolding drama, helping them to clarify, extend and deepen their thinking and to listen to and reflect upon another character's viewpoint. (*Unit 1, Activity 11*)

- **develop the drama**

For example, new information can be added by the Teacher in Role or gathered from the children by the Teacher in Role in order to elicit further information about a character or event and to move the plot forward. (*Unit 5, Activity 5*)

- **build, maintain or heighten dramatic tension**

For example, in order to create, stay with and make memorable moments of significance in the drama. The Teacher in Role can generate excitement and create suspense. (*Unit 3, Activity 11*)

- **manage pupil and class behaviour from within the fiction**

For example, 'Mr Once Upon a Time will hear our plans if we speak too loudly.' (*Unit 1, Activity 11*). The teacher as a character in the drama can offer reasons from within the drama itself for silence, full attention, quieter working, adult behaviour, new groupings and so on.

- **conclude the drama**

For example, it is possible to use Teacher in Role to bring the drama to a close and provide guided and mediated reflection through the solitary voice (soliloquy) of the teacher as a reflective character or storyteller (*Unit 1, Activity 19*).

Teacher in Role (TiR) is possibly the most powerful, interactive and engaging drama strategy of all and the most potent in relation to learning. It enables the teacher to be alongside the pupil as a fellow participant and interactive model and mediator of the shared imagined drama experience at moments of cognition. When adults are playing with children they often naturally slip into pretend roles and when reading stories they often bring the characters alive through the expressive use of voice, as if they are actually the characters. The TiR strategy formalizes this and takes it a few steps further, bringing in clear learning intentions for the child. It is possible to do many drama activities with children without the teacher going into role but it severely restricts the teacher's flexibility and effectiveness in terms of being interactive with children and shaping experiences at key moments of cognition.

Non-actors need not shy away from this strategy. TiR does not require the teacher to have significant acting ability. Indeed, powerful acting performances by teachers can stun children into not joining in. First and foremost what is required is simply that teachers are willing and able to present a set of attitudes with seriousness and commitment as if they are someone else – to play at make-believe

and pretend with their class in a serious way. If a teacher signals embarrassment or a 'We are all messing about together' approach to being in role with children, then the children will follow this lead. Worthwhile and engaging drama is unlikely to result. Conversely, if the teacher is clearly putting real effort into developing a role with integrity then the children will have a positive role model on which to base their own role play and are likely to support their teacher and thereby the drama process.

Teachers working in role with clear commitment are less likely to have class control problems than those who demonstrate that they feel silly or awkward. An insecure teacher can make some pupils feel uncomfortable and their answer to this may be displacement activity which throws the drama. However, teachers who can talk to their pupils honestly about any awkward feelings and enlist their support for Teacher in Role are more likely to get pupil support, saying for example 'I want to try to be in the drama with you if that is alright with you all. I haven't tried this before and I am going to need your help to make this work. Are you willing to try this with me for a short while and help me?' Far better to try this approach than deny the opportunities and possibilities that Teacher in Role can bring.

The Teacher in Role presents herself as an imaginary character in the drama but is still in reality the teacher and can shape the drama from within as the character or from outside as the teacher. The Teacher in Role can be interactive, active or passive at moments of cognition and emotion and can choose to stay in role or withdraw from it, whichever is judged to be of greatest benefit to the learner at any moment.

## How do I set up Teacher in Role?

The teacher can take a series of roles throughout a drama for a variety of purposes and can choose to relinquish or share her roles with other participants. If the teacher has signed the role through using a particular object – a hat, for example – then whoever wears the hat can assume the role for a while. The teacher can take the role back as necessary.

Roles need to be selected with care and the overall balance of the teacher's roles considered in terms of their purpose, frequency of duration and status relative to the role status of the pupils.

Teachers need to ask themselves:

- What am I trying to achieve with this role; what is its purpose in relation to both the pupils' learning and the drama?
- What type of role is best matched to my purpose?
- How will I make it clear to the children when I am in or out of role?
- How long should I stay in role for?

Roles can be defined in different ways. Most simply they can be seen as either information giving or information gathering.

## What am I trying to achieve with this role?

Teachers may choose to go into role for different purposes at different points in an evolving drama. Teachers may move in or out of the same role or change roles but must always make it clear to the children when they are in or out of role and who they are pretending to be. It is not necessary for a teacher to carry out a full-blown acting performance but they should not just look and sound the same as normal, as this makes it harder for the children to engage and they may be unsure if the teacher is actually in or out of role.

## What type of role is best matched to my purpose?

### *Information giving*

The Teacher in Role as a character is giving information and ideas to the fiction, thereby shaping the direction of the emerging drama from within the role. (*Unit 5, Activity 10*)

### *Information gathering*

The Teacher in Role is gathering the ideas of the children in role to enable the children to share ideas aloud and contribute to the content and direction of the drama. The teacher listens, welcomes and selects from the pupils shared ideas, weaving them back into the emerging fiction and giving a clear message to the pupils that their ideas and thoughts are valued and used to shape and inform the drama. (*Unit 6, Activity 7*)

Teachers' roles can also be categorized according to the relative status that they afford the pupil and teacher. Inexperienced teachers tend to cling to high status roles, for example the powerful King, the Chief and so on. This makes the insecure teacher of drama feel understandably safer about using role without feeling that they are relinquishing class control. High status roles used repeatedly however can be limiting as they repeatedly set up similar dynamics between pupils and the teacher and are too similar to the traditional pupil-teacher relationship.

Trying out roles other than high status roles is an necessary and rewarding shift for the teacher of drama. The exploratory and creative possibilities of the drama will be greatly enhanced by varying the status of the teacher's role and thereby shifting the relative status of the pupil's role. Teachers need not feel unsafe about losing control of the class or appearing to do so. They can always come out of role whenever they wish and reassert themselves as the teacher as long as it is kept clear to the class when the teacher is entering or leaving his/her role.

### ***High status: for example, the mill owner*** (*Unit 3, Activity 10*)

This is the role of someone in charge. The role carries with it an expectation that the Teacher in Role will be obeyed. However, this type of role can be intimidating and inhibiting and the children may feel restricted in their speech and actions. They may be predominantly obeying and responding to the dominant Teacher in Role, which may not be particularly demanding or enabling creatively. It is possible to play high status roles in a way that break down stereotypes – for example, the King who is hopeless at his job and reliant on his advisers (who therefore hold the real power).

### ***Mid status: for example, the intermediary, the messenger from the government*** (*Unit 6, Activity 8*)

This is a useful role that teachers often take. The teacher is in role as the messenger or intermediary acting on behalf of the person in charge, who is not present. This is a very versatile position to take, enabling the teacher to shift between being either at one with the children or at one with the absent authority. It enables the teacher to withdraw and return back and fore with new messages from their master, the one in authority. It allows the messenger to give or gather information from the children and give or gather information from the absent ruler. It enables the messenger to maintain a safe distance from any hostility to the ruler and to sympathize with the people. It enables the pupils to explain any feelings of hostility to the messenger without the messenger having to respond. It gives a reason for children to communicate messages clearly to a messenger who is only trying to carry accurate messages.

**Low status:** for example, the person in need of help or the outsider (Unit 1, Activity 12)

Adopting a low status role in relation to children is often very rewarding and encouraging. It often yields very caring responses from them such as talking with or listening to the imprisoned Mr Once Upon a Time, usually provokes sympathy and concern in children. The children know that the teacher is only pretending to need their help as a character but they feel for the character and are empowered through the drama to support their teacher as the character. The children in role feel needed by the Teacher in Role and feel that they are important, valued and helpful. They are enabled to engage with the positive feeling of helping another person and this is particularly powerful when this person is the teacher as it is a reversal of the normal situation in which the teacher usually helps them.

**Equal status:** for example, the teacher and pupils are all villagers together (Unit 1, Activity 8)

Taking on the same role as the children – all villagers with the same problem to solve, for instance – is a levelling experience for both the class and the teacher. It frees the children and teacher up from the status quo, hierarchical, teacher-pupil relationship, enabling the children to treat the Teacher in Role as an equal partner within the drama. For example, when carrying out a problem-solving activity within the drama, the children's ideas are given the same value and space as the teacher's within the imagined forum.

## How will I make it clear to children when I am in or out of role?

An easy way of presenting Teacher in Role to young children is by asking them if they would like to meet a character from a story that they know and then to tell them that for a little while you will be pretending to be that character (story-person). Check that they understand that you will be pretending before proceeding. You may say that you will only be pretending to be that character when you are sitting in a particular chair or holding a particular object or wearing a particular garment or accessory. This is called 'signing' the role. It needs to be very clear when you are in or out of role, just as it needs to be very clear when the children themselves are. The teacher's role needs to be 'signed' clearly. To suddenly have your teacher behaving as another person with no warning would be confusing and probably disturbing. Teachers may wish to prepare the children for Teacher in Role by talking with them about it first, explaining who they will be pretending to be and then practising with them for a minute or two. They may stop at intervals to check out with the children that they are comfortable with the teacher being in role. They are usually delighted and intrigued by it. The teacher being actively in role with children also gives a powerful message about the important status being given by the teacher to make-believe play and drama. If you are going to try Teacher in Role, you do not need to go in for a major acting performance but it helps if you come across to the children in some way that does not involve you looking and sounding as you do normally.

## How long should I stay in role for?

Teacher in Role is not an acting trip for the thespian teacher, it is a powerful teaching strategy for all teachers. Having decided on the function of the role or roles that he will take, the teacher should then only stay in role for as long as is necessary to achieve the defined purpose of that role. The actual time a teacher is in role may vary considerably from lesson to lesson. The drama for learning teacher aims to facilitate and offer the majority of the ownership of the drama to the children, to stimulate and invite their thinking and creative ideas and let them help shape the drama and its outcomes. This is not congruent with the Teacher in Role dominating the drama for long periods

and this would be unlikely to sustain the interest of the children. They want to take part too! Drama is about the children devising drama with the interactive, in-role support of the teacher as facilitator, mediator and model, and maybe protagonist. It is not about the children as a passive audience watching a teacher's overzealous theatrical performance.

## **How can I leave the role?**

At the simplest level, the teacher can state that they are coming out of role. Alternatively or additionally, this can be signalled visually and symbolically by putting down the object associated with the role, for example, the feather that is held by the Teacher in Role as a Native American Chief (*Unit 6, Activity 4*). The teacher can also move from a physical space that is associated with the role, for example, get up from a particular character's chair.