

**Role play in teacher education: Is there still a place for it?**

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**Abstract**

This article presents a case study discussing the value and significance of role play and its application in teaching the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (CoP) as part of a module on Inclusive Practice in the context of Initial Teacher Training (ITT). Following a pedagogic necessity, role play was introduced to support more sustained reflection on the relationship between the CoP and classroom practice and to consider the complexities of inclusive practice in education. The research used multiple methods: questionnaires, observations, participatory action research and evaluations to explore the research aims. The findings suggest that students developed a range of skills, gained a more nuanced understanding of the implications of the CoP and showed a better self-awareness regarding inclusive practice. The many benefits reported here emerged from applying role play in the context of ITT. However, its flexible nature makes it transferable to other disciplines and contexts.

**Key words**

Role play; special educational needs; code of practice; learning, teaching; higher education.

**Background**

In higher education, student engagement and student satisfaction have always been prominent features, but have now come to the fore. Lecturers and Universities have been pursuing various ways of ensuring that they meet these expectations to prepare their students well for their workplace and future. Emerging evidence from the 'What works?' programme (Thomas and Jamieson-Ball, 2011:11), reveals the importance of collaborative, student-centred learning and teaching strategies. In other words, the interaction during teaching should cater for the academic and personal development of students. It is therefore important for tutors to be alert to teaching methods which students enjoy to increase their engagement so that more effective learning takes place.

Role play is a way of strengthening interaction and student-staff relationships. However, is there a role for role play in a modern university? Are students using role plays? Are they as important as they were once thought to be? Are virtual case creators replacing them? There are many benefits to be gained from using role play. In this article, I focus on the value and significance of role play and its

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application to teach the Special Education Needs Code of Practice (CoP) (DfES, 2001) to trainee teachers. First, the context and professional reflection are presented. Then the theoretical background is considered which contains an analysis of its application in various disciplines to demonstrate that role play is a useful and flexible teaching method in higher education. Thereafter, matters related to research design, findings, and discussion follow before the conclusion.

### **Context**

The CoP sets out the responsibilities of local authorities, schools and individual teachers for the management of pupils with Special Education Needs (SEN) and reflects a commitment to provide equality of opportunity and high achievement for all children. It signalled a significant shift in the approach to the classification of needs and established a graduated approach to assessment and planning for meeting the needs of children with SEN and suggested ways of evaluating the progress of children and the role of various agencies (DfES, 2001).

Inclusive Practice is a module taught in the second year of a three year BA with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) course at this university. It has three main aims. First, students are expected to demonstrate knowledge of current legal requirements and policy surrounding SEN provision and disability. Second, they demonstrate how knowledge of individual needs, assessment, methods of teaching and planning can enable all pupils to access, engage and participate in learning. Third, they demonstrate an understanding of the role of professional and parental/carer partnerships in SEN provision.

Students are given the opportunity to work in smaller groups in seminar rooms and as a whole cohort in lecture halls. During the first year of their course, students undertake a school placement. It is the importance of introducing role play in the Inclusive Practice module which forms the basis of this study with an aim to foster a deeper understanding of the CoP and of using role play in teaching and learning.

### **Professional reflection**

After delivering the CoP on several occasions, personally and professionally, I questioned the effectiveness and appropriateness of my approach in enhancing learning so that my students fully recognised the relevance of the CoP and their engagement with it. I should note, at this stage in their course, many are aware and get some exposure to children who have SEN during their first school placement. So, whilst they became aware of SEN being an essential feature of most primary classrooms, the extent to which they considered it to be a direct result of government policy affecting many groups of people, and its complex and controversial nature, was unclear. Recognising this for trainees is important so that they can begin to realise the links between politics and education and issues related to social justice and equality in education.

As a member of a team, I struggled with the notion of teaching a section of the CoP to students who, in my view, were intelligent and able to read it for themselves. In essence, I was transferring key facts from the document via the

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PowerPoint and activity sheets and, indeed, I responded to the occasional clarification sought by them. I deployed a case study to promote discussions and following this, created a list of factors and/or issues, which teachers need to consider in ensuring that the needs of children with SEN are met, along with various form and templates to analyse. As I reflected, it appeared to me that this method did not afford an in-depth, critical, holistic engagement and assessment of the CoP and its implications. Simultaneously, I wondered how my colleagues were feeling and whether they shared my views.

### **Literature review**

Role play is a term which describes a range of activities characterised by involving participants in 'as-if' actions (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997:1). This could be achieved by creating hypothetical situations and circumstances expressed practically in a classroom which facilitate the combination of theory and practice. Often, it is termed simulation which allows students to take on different and authentic roles (Knight, 2002:130). It is also a planned learning activity where participants take on the role of individuals representing different perspectives to meet specific learning objectives, such as to promote empathy or to expose participants to a scenario in which they might participate in future (Fry, Ketteridge, Marshall, 1999:439). The tutor provides explanations for the roles students perform, organises space and time, set limits and ensures that the purpose is explicitly stated. The tutor might, occasionally, explore ethical issues such as confidentiality and privacy.

In discussing the epistemological context for using role play, Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997:13) argues that it equally embraces conventional and non-conventional paradigms and applications. However, Yardley-Matwiejczuk posits that role play offers a unique potential with respect to the enhancement of subjectivists, deconstructionists and contextualised approaches to the gathering of knowledge, and to the generation of action. It offers huge potential mainly because of its flexibility with respect to a variety of contexts and complexity of foci. Indeed, it is commonly used to train therapists, counsellors, social workers and teachers (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997:34).

Role play appears among the social family of models which are techniques emphasising the social nature of learning (Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins, 2009:126). To explain, students become initiators of their own learning as interaction with others is emphasised and dialogue becomes a vehicle for developing, sharing and considering ideas. In terms of cognitive and academic growth, Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins (2009:127) maintain that these models assist students to use the perspectives of others to clarify and expand their own thinking and conceptualisation of ideas. In such learning situations, students, rather than being passive receivers, are constructive and take an active role, which is considered superior (Joyner and Young, 2006:225).

Consequently, educators working together generate collective energy which is termed 'synergy'. The social models of teaching, role play being one of them, are constructed to take advantage of this phenomenon by building learning

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communities (Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins, 2009:126). In other words, during role play, students conceptualise their roles and improvise professional and interpersonal behaviours (Joyner and Young, 2006:225). They come together to create a shared understanding of the purpose of the activity and of the issues that emerge during a professional learning situation.

The power of role play as an effective pedagogic tool can be discerned by its application across diverse disciplines. For instance, Joyner and Young (2006:225) used it with their medical students to avoid the limitations placed by real patients so that their students could experience the perspectives of both the clinician and the patient. Consequently, role play was best suited for their students because of the high cognitive load required when practising their clinical, diagnostic and patient management skills.

Likewise, Kerr, Troth and Pickering (2003:167) introduced 'real world' cases of Information Systems. In comparison to traditional case study discussions, their results, based on a short survey, showed that students considered role play to be superior for their learning. However, Kerr, Troth and Pickering (2003:170) found that in their sessions, observers were not as enthusiastic as participants. This suggests the significance of an inclusive approach where all students in a teaching session participate and are actively attached to the task. Of course, this creates the common challenge of using role play with larger groups. Nevertheless, they concluded that role plays offered a friendlier and fun environment to learn about Information Systems (Kerr, Troth and Pickering, 2003:171).

Role plays aid in generating an academic environment where students are offered contexts to express their viewpoints. Brown (1994:105) experienced a pedagogic concern in finding effective methods of incorporating ethics into business education. In Brown's experience, role play provided the advantage of creating low risk conditions for expressing extreme opinions. This means that in situations where sensitive language and issues related to discrimination, human rights and justice are the subject matter; role play can be used as a valuable mechanism for allowing freedom of expression (Brown, 1994:109). In a professional setting, students can challenge themselves and each other regarding key issues of inclusive practice and have their beliefs challenged to deal with misconceptions.

Recently, Hafford-Letchfield (2010:255) examined the effectiveness of debate and role play as pedagogical strategies when teaching complex ethical issues in law and ethics. As part of the dramatic and creative participative pedagogies, role play enabled her students to develop a broader view transcending a more narrow focus on teaching aspects of anti-discrimination legislation. Earlier, McGregor (1993:223) investigated the effectiveness of role-play and anti-racist teaching in reducing students' prejudices. Positive results for these in changing and reducing racist attitudes were reported. Thus, role play as a method is useful for attitudinal changes too, although these are not guaranteed (Sotto, 2007).

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Despite its many advantages and popularity for promoting learning, like other teaching methods, role play has its limitations and critics. Some students may be reluctant to participate and others may feel intimidated (Kerr, Troth and Pickering, 2003:171). There may also be implementation problems (McGregor, 1993:217) and other factors that might impinge on its effectiveness are time and space. Beyond these physical features, it is significant to recognise that although the activity is a role play, the feelings of the participants are real, and, therefore, an appropriate debrief should be carried out. Moreover, it may not be wholly transferable to other countries where different learning cultures operate (O'Neill and McMahon, 2005:33).

### **Research questions**

This study was concerned with the following aims:

- to determine the manner in which some team members taught the CoP;
- to identify concerns that students have about SEN provisions;
- to explore the potential of using role play in teaching the CoP;
- to evaluate the impact of using role play in teaching the CoP.

### **Research design**

#### *Methodology*

To collect data, I used multiple methods to serve the specific purposes of this study. Questionnaires were given to three tutors; I observed students, used participatory action research (PAR) and at the end students completed an evaluation.

Using questionnaires has been criticised for a lower rate of return and for the lack of opportunity to probe deeper beyond the given answers (May, 2011:104). However, I used it due to time constraints and convenience; it was a rapid method to discover the approaches of my colleagues (May, 2011:94). In relation to the aims of the study, it facilitated the exploration of the prevalence of expressed perceptions and challenges in teaching the CoP.

I chose observation to get a 'feel' of the atmosphere, the nature of the interaction, and the skills applied in the role play. These are traits which are not easily captured through other research methods. Participant observation was appropriate as I was immersed in their activities trying to understand their development and reactions to role play (May, 2011:163). Furthermore, it afforded intimate acquaintance with the phenomenon under study (Fielding, 2008:272). However, there are drawbacks to observation. The mental constructs of the observer may influence the interpretation of what is observed and the researcher may affect the event (Gray, 2009:397). Nevertheless, a few factors assisted in reducing observer effects. I had an established rapport with students and had made my intentions explicit at the start (Gray, 2009, 412). I avoided unnecessary verbal communication except for presenting questions or issues; also I did not aim to enhance the actual role play. Further, I was conscious not to be judgemental and avoided making assumptions about their thoughts on the value of role play. These were explored through the evaluation.

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Different research methods are applied in classroom research. These usually involve qualitative interpretive modes of inquiry and data collection by teachers with a view to making judgements about improving their practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005:561). My concern about improving teaching emerged from reflection and conversations with colleagues, which were subsequently confirmed using a short questionnaire, and through observations and feedback from students. The explicit aim of introducing role play was to improve the learning and teaching situation. Hence, a third research perspective, that of PAR, was applied as my intervention was conceived and driven by experiencing an unsatisfactory situation (Silver, 2008:105). I also wanted students to 'see' the CoP in action rather than simply knowing and discussing some of its relevant content. Moreover, a focus of PAR is on praxis, to recognise that theory and practice in research are both inseparable and iterative (Silver, 2008:106). Therefore, students were informed about the purposes of introducing role play and the process was made transparent which is encouraged in PAR (Silver, 2008:117). They were specifically involved in reflecting on their experiences and shaped the organisation and management of the role play itself.

Participatory approaches have been criticised for being unscientific and for producing anecdotal, subjective results that cannot be generalised beyond the population under study (Silver, 2008:118). Whilst these may be appropriate for other researches, Silver asserts that it may be more useful to evaluate projects according to the effectiveness of the intervention and the validity and transferability of the findings (Silver, 2008:118). In my study reliability was enhanced by using multiple data gathering tools. Validity was improved by giving voice to the participants, providing verbatim responses and using a purposeful sample (Gray, 2009:191) and having students complete an evaluation. These measures strengthened the transferability of the findings.

Finally, student evaluations were completed for the module. This was used to establish the extent of the success of their learning and to evidence the potential of role play.

#### *Sampling method*

Since the study emerged out of specific concerns, the selection of the participants was deliberate. A purposive sampling technique of this kind was particularly useful as it fitted the aims of the study. However, May (2011:100) has cautioned against its representativeness. Nevertheless, I used this as it is a popular technique where the focus is on gaining insights and understanding the view of those representing a target audience (Gilbert, 2008:512).

#### *Data analysis*

The absence of widely accepted rules about analysing qualitative data (Gray, 2009:494) allowed an inductive approach to be used. In addition, verbatim comments have been included to allow the data to 'speak for themselves'. Their comments have been selected in a detached and objective way by including all available negative comments and relevant positive ones.

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### *Research ethics*

The study complied with the faculty ethical requirements in educational research to protect the interests of all parties concerned. Students were informed about the purpose of the study and that it was unrelated to any assessment and background preparation was not required. Finally, their views are presented anonymously and their participation was voluntary, moreover, data were used for research purposes (Bulmer, 2008:150-152).

### **Findings**

#### *Questionnaire*

Colleagues teaching the CoP commented:

'Mainly a theoretical approach, I have tried to incorporate the needs of trainees as future teachers with the responsibility of SEN i.e. to familiarise them with Individual Educational Plans.'

'I have taught it as part of an introduction to Inclusion and SEN in schools and EY settings. I have made references to it in PowerPoint presentations and used this document as part of students list of references.'

Evidently, they faced challenges. One wrote:

'Lack of practical knowledge as it is a working document for the school management and individual teachers, limited understanding of its full implication, particularly, issues related to the complementation of both the SEN Code of Practice and Inclusion.'

So, it seemed that a mainly theoretical approach was evident in our teaching.

#### *Participant Action Research*

In the role play I ensured every student had a role to play in the scenario either as a character, or as an attached observer whose viewpoints were invited in response to the perspectives of these characters and the issues faced by them. The observers were attached to ensure that they were engaged and had an interactive role, thereby reducing the lack of enthusiasm (Kerr, Troth and Pickering, 2003).

#### *Some of their concerns included:*

'Need more knowledge about SEN.'

'How to diagnose SEN and disabilities?'

'Informing parents about a child with SEN.'

'Where do you draw the line in terms of behaviour?'

How to address individual needs for SEN, on top of whole-class teaching?

Using support agencies

When asked about the distinction between SEN and disability, a student declared: '*I don't know anything about it*'. Another stated: '*The question is*

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*difficult to answer because 'disable' is an uncomfortable term to talk about!*  
Others found the definitions related to SEN 'tedious' and 'mind blowing'.

Students had also been asked about the significance of discussing definitions with the aim of enabling them to know, understand and use them appropriately. Consequently, several benefits were identified:

- voids confusion
- avoids labels
- allows you to focus on their learning needs

#### *Observation*

I observed students expressing their thoughts and feelings confidently, taking turns and negotiating their philosophy on inclusion during the open debate. I noted that they expressed their own concerns regarding the provisions for children with SEN as shown above. They appeared to highlight a measure of openness and genuinely wanted to do their best.

I observed them sequence their ideas, clarify their thinking and express their feelings as they deliberated. My notes show students revealing their pleasure and surprise in listening to others who had, perhaps, views which they did not necessarily agree with. I saw them sharing space and time fairly, playing different roles, and I heard them using appropriate language and technical terms. I observed them confront some everyday concerns which some of them would face in schools.

#### *Evaluation*

Students were mainly positive about the advantages of learning through role play. Some stated:

- Role play allowed everyone to have a say rather than be dominated by those who are usually assertive and more confident
- knowledge about the condition [Down Syndrome] rather than grannies tales
- It was boring
- Not too time consuming
- It also got me to think more deeply
- It became more personal – as they were put in a real position in a realist scenario and role designation made is personal as well.
- Easy to relate to the debate set out at the start in terms of the ideas about inclusion and the society we need to bring about.

From the above comments, it should not be construed that other methods were unfavourable. On the contrary, some students stated:

- Visiting speakers were interesting.
- PowerPoints were full of info and very useful.
- Moodle was very useful.
- A lot of opportunity for collaborative work.

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## **Discussion**

The findings suggest that the initial approach was mainly theoretical. This probably meant sharing the essential information from the CoP, allowing discussions and completing tasks. In order to be up-to-date with developments in this area, occasionally sessions were supplemented by using the expertise of teachers and SEN Coordinators.

In addition to the specific concerns expressed by some students, which make it clear that some students required more relevant, transferable and real learning and the nature of SEN and disability was problematic for some students. Some felt uncomfortable to discuss this subject showing signs of uncertainty about articulating their thoughts lest they said something offensive. This illustrates the necessity for a mutually respectful teaching situation.

The success of role play, which tends to differ with each group of students, lies in the philosophical vision of the outcome which a tutor intends to encourage the students to explore. This is crucial for the development of an open-minded and professional stance rather than accepting the convention that for schools to be inclusive SEN provisions should all take place in mainstream schools.

Practically, a factor to consider relates to the ease with which students enter their roles and are able to express their views openly. In my experience, it helps to give each character a label so that the character becomes prominent during the role play. Students unwilling to take on any role should be given the right to opt out lest the role play is affected.

Moreover, as role plays can generate strong feelings (Sotto, 2007:246), it is important for everyone to discard their role after a session. I ask my group to remove their labels and return to their original places.

In designing a role play, tutors need to be aware of the diverse experiences of students, and therefore, decide on the level of complexity required to meet the learning needs of their students without the role play losing its focus and, consequently, becoming an irrelevant activity. Indeed some students may feel shy and uncomfortable by the role play (Kerr, Troth and Pickering, 2003:170). Therefore appropriate steps will need to be taken to involve such students.

Creating a role play space exemplifies a relevant context. Relevant contexts are important in assisting students to position themselves in varied roles because without support, some students, especially those at this early stage of the course, may find it challenging to think beyond the basic level of understanding the needs of children with SEN. Namely, the focus of their learning appears to be on meeting the immediate needs of such children (what do I do with SEN children?) rather than gaining a bigger picture which includes, among other topics, gaining some knowledge and understanding of the historical development of SEN.

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Linked to the above, is the notion of interconnectedness in SEN. Many issues which unfold during the role play are not isolated issues. Hence, a tutor needs to be judicious and supplement significant historical, theoretical, and political perspectives perhaps with reference to key texts. In addition to such inputs, role play offers opportunities for immediate feedback and is a powerful method of self-discovery and self-understanding (Joyner and Young, 2006:225).

In role play, a learning situation is created which allows students to think outside the box of their own experiences and to develop creative ways of approaching their values and assumptions and problem-solve. People learn a new attitude best when they can experience it, and role play helps learners to experience a new attitude (Sotto, 2007:244). For some students, it is unlikely that their values and assumptions regarding SEN have been formally challenged and so they come face to face with other values in a role play.

I argue that experiential learning, which includes role-play, is a particularly effective way of developing understanding of the relationship and constraints of policy and practice. In the teaching room, students observe the consequences that policy decisions have on children and their future. In addition, as discussed earlier, in highlighting the specific preferences by these individuals (whether to include or exclude the child), the importance of empathy in teaching and learning became evident. Brown (1994:109) found role play suitable for raising students' moral consciousness. Some of these students were encouraged to decentre and take a fresh view on inclusion and equality when they heard fellow students, occasionally, relating their personal and family experiences with Down's syndrome and schools. Thus, it allowed students to understand other peoples' positions (Kerr, Troth and Pickering, 2003:170).

Involving students in role play scenarios enables them to prepare well for classrooms and to anticipate unfamiliar concerns and issues which evolve as the debate ensues. Role play assists students to sharpen their cognitions through interaction (Joyce, Calhoun, and Hopkins, 2009:126). It is also a mechanism which sensitises them to some of the sensitive and controversial aspects of school life which they could face later. Students use their imagination and incorporate technical vocabulary, which some were hesitant to apply at the beginning, to recreate roles and express experiences. Through role play generic capabilities were also developed. They had opportunities to listen, develop skills in making reasoned arguments, and skills in advocacy and dispute resolution as well as developing abilities to work co-operatively (Hafford-Letchfield, 2010:249).

Whilst the setting of directed tasks is an essential feature of learning in higher education, it may not be the most effective and powerful method for gaining a wider perspective on a particular issue especially a policy document, such as the CoP. It is necessary to view it from varied perspectives due to the fact that it affects the life and work of a range of stake holders. Creating a scenario where these different perspectives play out their interests and set their own agenda is helpful in developing multiple lenses through which students can look into the

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complexity and significance of the CoP. Indeed, in recognising the advantages of using role play, Brown (1994:109) concluded that it facilitated to capture students' imagination.

Following the introduction of role play for CoP, in subsequent years, the team became aware of the growth in confidence among some students in relation to having first-hand experience of visiting special schools. What started with a few students being interested in visiting special schools has now become an important feature in two specific ways; in addition to mainstream schools, students are now offered placements in special schools and an enhancement module is available for those who wish to gain further expertise in SEN.

### **Conclusion**

This study was carried out with trainee teachers following professional and personal reflections. After the pedagogic concern which emerged therefrom, this study first explored existing methods used by team members teaching the CoP and identified student concerns about SEN provisions. Then, role play was introduced to change and improve a learning situation so that trainees gained a deeper understanding and critically engaged with the CoP.

This article has demonstrated that role play, in its various forms, is applied in a variety of disciplines in higher education for different purposes. The findings suggest that not all students in this study found role play effective, although most benefitted in different ways. For some, it assisted in developing their sophistication and, in an informal atmosphere, facilitated enquiry and open-mindedness. Others felt that role play used time efficiently and were able to relate the debate to the nature of an inclusive society.

Although there are some challenges of using role play in teaching and learning, overall, in a mature, safe and professional environment, it is a useful technique for presenting students with a scenario related to the CoP, and to explore some sensitive and personal issues with greater confidence.

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