Literacy Matters

Guardians of the Universe

By Brian Edmiston

"Our spaceship has landed on the alien planet after four years travel from Earth. Crew members are frightened of the strange beings they have discovered on the planet we have named Shine, and are afraid that the aliens may attack them. They arm themselves with the guns from the storeroom and shoot at the aliens which run away leaving one of their wounded infants. Some of the crew take it back to the spaceship so that they can examine it."

Begin a drama based on Jill Paton Walsh’s *The Green Book*, and you may well arrive at a situation similar to the one described above. Carol Moore found herself in such circumstances with her special needs group of six boys grades three to five. If the class, in role as crew members, becomes involved in the problem of how to react to the aliens, you may also find yourself feeling very uncomfortable as your kids shout "kill, kill, kill."

Carol was unsure where to go next, and invited me to plan with her and to come in to her classroom when I could, in order to advise and assist her in continuing this first attempt to integrate drama into her regular classroom work.

She had been in role along with the boys as they all pretended to be members of the crew. She wanted them to consider alternatives to the use of violence, but she found this impossible. They wanted to attack the aliens and she could not stop that. Because this was what they so clearly wanted to happen, I suggested that she allow them to go ahead and then we could see if they might think more deeply about the consequences of their actions.

Because they saw a baby alien, I thought that they might feel some empathy for a young helpless inhabitant of Shine. However, the boys in this group were not influenced in their actions by any such feelings; they did not want to return the baby and did not want to consider the aliens as anything other than hostile. Indeed, they continued to plan further attacks.

Rather than caring for the infant (represented by a coat), or thinking about how its parents might feel, they wanted to dissect it! Within two minutes these boys had set up an operating room (a table) and a scientific study area (the microscope) and had begun to sketch, research, and take notes. Though Carol had not intended to begin a science unit at this time, she was flexible enough to follow the lead of her class and consequently spent over a week studying the human body through the group’s comparisons of the body of the alien with the bodies of humans.

“I never knew that they could all get so involved,” she said. The group eagerly continued their research and naturally integrated their dramatic play into all their activities. While they studied and operated on the alien, they interacted, using detailed analytical talk. While they pretended to be researchers they actually conducted research. They used a microscope to examine actual blood samples, read informational books on the human body, charted similarities and differences, wrote reports, and cooperatively synthesized their week’s work. Carol was surprised at how little she had to do. “They were really motivated and really wanted to find out how they were different from the aliens; the drama seemed to make it important for them to find that out.”

Though Carol was pleased with the depth and quality of their scientific thinking, she was still unhappy about the group’s attitude toward the
aliens. Even though they were dealing with a baby, which they agreed had subsequently died, they were not interested in having a moral discussion on the rights and wrongs of their actions. They still saw the aliens as enemies, and the dead baby seemed to make little difference. The boys seemed unable or unwilling to consider how the aliens saw them; they did not respond to Carol’s or my suggestions that the aliens might be angered by the loss of the baby. Though they had been deeply involved in dramatic play, there was no public reflection on their actions.

Though they had apparently not felt much empathy when focused on an alien, I wondered how they might respond if the roles were reversed — they could become inhabitants of Shine focused on the human intruders. Maybe this shift in perspective would encourage alternatives to “kill, kill, kill.”

I was wrong! The inhabitants of Shine discovered the body of the child outside the human’s spaceship and immediately began to talk in a very reasoned way of tit-for-tat revenge. Nothing would do but that the humans would have to suffer the same fate, one of their infants would be kidnapped.

A clever plan to sneak into the human spaceship was worked out. They enjoyed and understood the game of allowing the kidnapping to happen. Two boys pretended to be guards and became distracted by a noise, which allowed two others to sneak into the spaceship and take a baby (represented by a blanket). We were shocked when once they were back in their cave they talked of killing the child, because that was what had been done to “their” baby. We had thought that having a human baby might have made a difference, but for them it was simply a question of “an eye for an eye, and a baby for a baby”!

In an attempt to focus more on feelings and to encourage the possibilities for negotiation, I met them in role as the mother of the human baby. The mother said she had had nothing to do with the killing. She offered to talk to the others in their spaceship; she appealed to their feelings and begged them to return her baby. All of these offers were rejected and the inhabitants of Shine told her and the other humans to leave. She said that they could not leave and that she did not want to hurt them, she just wanted her baby back. They did not want to listen, and took her hostage. They would not return the baby; it had to die.

In subsequent work, one of the boys took over the role of the human mother, but the boys in the group were unable to negotiate their way out of this stalemate. In discussion outside the drama, they realized that the humans and the inhabitants of Shine had legitimate grievances, but they were unable to talk their way out of the dilemma they felt themselves to be in.

**ALIENS**

Dissected the baby
Killed an alien baby
Stole the planet
Ate the berries
Shot at us
Threw babies out

**HUMANS**

Aliens took babies
Killed two humans
Thought would hurt them

List of grievances: students took the role of either aliens or humans and developed this statement.
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The group was clearly not avoiding the problems. As the people of Shine they were able to reflect on their previous actions as the people from Earth. The group accepted what had happened and did not try to deny anything. They took up the perspectives of the victims, desperately trying to stop the perceived threats in the way which made sense to them; they saw no possible resolutions other than attacking the aliens or one of the groups leaving the planet. Carol was surprised that this group (normally so ready to deal with social problems) seemed unable to work through to a resolution with this fictional, but very intensely felt, problem. They wanted to find a resolution, but could not come up with one. Though they were able to see both sides of the problem, they were unable to stand aside and really take up a third party perspective which would enable them to work through the problem.

I wondered, however, if they could do this within a different drama frame, one which would require them to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable. I decided to give them the perspective of the "Guardians of the Universe." This made sense to them and they said that it was a bit like God or the angels.

They agreed that as Guardians they had powers to view the past and the present, and to see into the future. They also agreed that they could not change the future but that they could talk inside the heads of those on the planet and thus plant thoughts which might cause them to see things in a different way so that they might make different choices and thus affect what happened.

They were framed with the power to influence the outcome, but not the power to make the problem disappear. They could not, for instance, just move the humans to another planet. The people had to decide what to do. The group was therefore able to look more deeply into the problem than when members were in the midst of creating it.

We stood in a circle and looked down on Shine. They no longer saw "us" and "them" but were now synthesizing the problems and seeing the commonalties between the opposing groups. The boys could see the same anger, hatred, and "shooting" on both sides. Their faces were serious, and when they looked into the future all they could see ahead for the whole planet was war, destruction and death for all.

"Could these beings from different planets live together on this planet?" I asked. They answered yes, and then searched back in time for a significant moment when, if something different had happened, the future would have been very different. They decided on the first meeting between the alien with the baby and the human. They set up two boys to show this moment for us. We looked on and wondered what would have to be different. After a few wondering about things they could do, one boy said, "He will have to see the

Aliens
Making Friends
Who is going to let their hostage go first?
Who is going to leave?

Issues "Guardians of the Universe" considered.
goodness in her.” “What could he see that would make him feel that?” I asked. “He might see that he could marry her,” one of the boys said seriously. This led to peals of laughter, but also to an agreement that would mean he would see her differently.

Now they set up the wedding and became the guests. Everyone spoke a few words which touched on the significance of the marriage for both peoples. When we returned to the significant moment of the meeting between the human and the alien, the Guardians put the thoughts of the wedding into the mind of the human, and we wondered what might happen now. The boy representing the human knelt down and said, almost weeping, “I can’t kill her.” We concluded the drama by narrating what happened on Shine: there was a wedding between the peoples and the war and destruction did not follow.

The frame or perspective of the Guardians of the Universe seemed to have given this class a way of finding a satisfying resolution to their dilemma. As Guardians, the children were placed in a more distant relationship with the problem, yet were more involved with finding a resolution. They were not as involved in the details and the feelings of anger a close-in perspective gave, but in the wider view and feelings of a need for a reconciliation. This was eventually presented in the image of the wedding.

The Guardians had to deal with disturbances in the Universe and from that perspective they did not see enemies. Rather, they saw a problem on a planet which involved two peoples, both causing potential destruction. They saw the similarities between the two groups in a way they could not when they were pretending to be from Earth or from Shine.

The third-party perspective gave the boys the opportunity they needed to step back from the problem and view it in a broader perspective. We could have posed the conflict to the boys through discussion and then asked them to come up with a solution. However, experiencing the problem from the inside was also important. Without their initial involvement in the first two perspectives they might never have been willing to contemplate a solution which would satisfy both groups.

This questioning of others and of self is promoting moral and intellectual autonomy; the participants are dealing with problems and grappling with alternative views and solutions. Autonomy involves the ability to take relevant factors into account when determining the best course of action for all concerned. If we strive to provide opportunities for children so that they must consider all points of view and they are also able to accept and revise their actions, we will have gone a very long way toward developing in them a belief in their own abilities to engage with demanding problems. As Kamii argues (1984), “Children mobilize their intelligence and the totality of their knowledge when they have to take a stand and consider opposing points of view.”

Reference

About the Author
Brian Edmiston is a third/fourth grade teacher at Highland Park Elementary School in Grove City, Ohio. He has offered workshops in classroom drama throughout Ohio and has coauthored several articles on the use of drama in elementary and middle school classrooms. Brian is currently conducting a teacher-researcher study of the use of drama with his own students.

About the Teacher
Carol Moore also teaches at Highland Park Elementary. She has taught for twenty-two years and has worked with special needs students for the past five years. She has found that drama reveals a great deal about children’s ability to tackle social problems.