Using Drama to Teach about the Eye
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Classroom teachers at Ivymount School in Rockville, Maryland, were having difficulty teaching about the eye, its parts, and how they function to a class of twelve nine-year-olds with learning disabilities. They asked me for suggestions on how to make the subject more concrete for their students.

First, each child built a model of the eye using styrofoam. This helped them identify the parts that made up the eye; however, they still had difficulty understanding how all the parts worked together as a whole. At this point I suggested that we build a human eye using the children as the working, moving parts.

We began by looking at the styrofoam models and listing the different parts of the eye: the Eyelid, the Iris, the Pupil, the Lens, the Retina, the Cones, the Rods, the Optic Nerve, and the Brain. Each child chose which part he or she would like to be. We decided that two children would work together to be the eyelid and two children would work together to be the iris. All other parts would be played by individual children.

Once the parts were assigned, each child had to answer the following questions:

1. Who/what are you?
2. What color are you?
3. What shape are you?
4. Where are you? Who/What are you next to?
5. What do you do?

The children were allowed to use their models and notes to help answer these questions. The names of the different parts were written on the board along with the definition provided by the child who played that part.

First, we positioned the Pupil. The Pupil lay down on his back and held his arms, slightly rounded, above his head. His arms would open wider as it became darker and close as it became lighter.

For the Iris, two children sat facing each other on either side of the Pupil's arms. They reached around the Pupil's arms and held each others' hands. One set of hands they held up and one set they held down to create a circle which could be widened or narrowed as it became lighter or darker.

In front of the Iris was the Eyelid, which was also formed with two children. They stood facing each other, holding a stick with a towel rolled around it. The towel was secured to the stick with thumbtacks. When the Eyelid was open, the towel was rolled around the stick. When the Eyelid was closed, the towel was unrolled and hung down.

The Lens sat behind the Pupil facing forward. The Lens stretched his arms toward the Pupil's feet.

Behind the Lens sat the Retina. The Retina faced the Lens's back and held his arms out on either side of the Lens.

Directly behind the Retina sat two children. One represented the Rods and one represented the Cones. They sat facing each other. One of their arms went under the Retina's arm to form a Rod or a Cone and one arm went back to touch the hand of the child behind them who played the Optic Nerve.

The Optic Nerve sat sideways behind the Rod and Cone with both arms outstretched to each side. One arm reached forward to touch the Rod and Cone's arms and the other arm reached backward to touch the Brain.

The last part of the eye was the Brain, who sat facing the front of the eye with both arms outstretched in front of him, hands touching the Optic Nerve.

One child played the part of Light. She turned the lights in the room on and off. When the lights were turned on, the Pupil decreased in size, moving his arms closer together, the Iris grew bigger, and the student playing the Cones went into action. When the

lights were turned off, the Pupil increased in size, the Iris grew smaller, and the student playing the Rods went into action.

When the Eyelids opened and closed, all the other parts of the eye had to adjust their activities.

We also practiced the process of seeing an object. We held a picture of a tree in front of the eye. This picture was passed along by all the eye parts to the Retina, which turned it upside down before passing it to the Optic Nerve. When the picture got to the Brain, the Brain turned it right side up again.

After we got the eye working well, we switched parts several times. Each time we recast, the children told each other what to do in their new parts. Each had several opportunities to experience the different parts of the eye and to explain verbally who and what they were to another child. At the end of this exercise, everyone really understood the parts of the eye and we'd had a lot of fun, too.

I have done similar exercises with the Circulatory System and the Digestive System. Each time, the process of the organ being studied became clear once the children had a personal experience with it.

These children had been exposed to drama and were used to acting out different things, so they responded immediately to the idea of acting out an eye. If you are working with children who are not very familiar with acting, you may first want to create a simple machine with them–a clock or a popcorn popper–to introduce the concept. First make individual machines, then create a machine using everyone in the group. This will help the children (and you) feel more comfortable with the idea of using your bodies in this way.

First know your subject matter. Then use your imagination to bring it to life. Be creative and have fun!

"It's getting hot outside," the nursery ants had to move the eggs to a chamber closer to the surface of the anthill. If I said, "It's getting cooler," the nursery ants had to move the eggs to a chamber farther in toward the center of the anthill.

Students who had an orange-tasting candy were worker ants and had to go out of the anthill and gather food (small paper tubes and wooden blocks)