

# A class act

*Integrating the performing arts across the primary curriculum*



If you want to unlock the hidden potential of early primary school children, drama is the key, according to Valerie Warwick, an experienced author, playwright and drama teacher.

Originally from the UK but now residing in Brisbane, she is the founder of Playtime Productions, an organisation that publishes and promotes plays for children.

Her latest book, *Prep – A Class Act*, is a workbook for prep teachers, aides, Year 1 teachers, principals, directors of childcare centres and teacher librarians who want to optimise early learning experiences for young children.

The book includes a range of original activities that develop those skills essential to success; not only learning to read and write but to function as a confident and articulate communicator.

Each of the 49 activities was designed to open up the possibility of multiple skill development and junior teachers with an understanding of the connections between these activities and curriculum guidelines will be able to plan focused learning and teaching episodes.

Written over 12 months with the support of the Head of the Junior School and prep staff at Ormiston College, prep students at St Oliver Plunkett Catholic College and the prep teachers and staff at Hatton Vale State Primary School, all in Queensland, the book provides various ways



*Drama teacher and playwright Valerie Warwick*

for teachers to tap into a child's creative capacity through dramatisation and imaginary play.

Using the 'Drama Tool Box' teachers can utilise the activities to help students develop better communication and improved listening skills, an extended vocabulary, effective speech, articulation, vocal expression and improved group communication skills. In fact, after just weeks, even five-year-olds understand the importance of articulation. To them it is just another word like elephant or aeroplane.

"The book really allows teachers to plan their lessons using the 'Early Years Learning Grid' at the end of the units," Valerie said. "Teachers

and students will enjoy constantly revisiting various creative activities which fit in across the curriculum, giving children a strong awareness of the various human resources they can draw on for developing their own inner confidence and self worth."

Of course, today's successful reader and writer is the student with a rich vocabulary and well-established phonological awareness skills. And Valerie says that playing with language, using the performing arts as a vehicle, helps children to develop knowledge of the sound structure of language and the ability to control sound. It also allows children to experience the fun, excitement and challenge of oral language development and with that, to enjoy success in literacy.

"For teachers the book provides increased understanding of the benefits of bringing the performing arts into the classroom, she says. "They can learn how to involve even the most reticent child into activities with their peers. It provides the key to unlocking their inner potential.

"As a society we are becoming more and more dependent on electronic communication such as email and text messaging, which means the art of face to face communication, even basic small talk, is being lost. That is why it is so important that children learn to communicate effectively. Drama gives children those skills."

Backing up Valerie's work is Noni Hazlehurst, one of Australia's most distinguished and respected actors and a member of the ABC Playschool team for over 20 years. In her foreword to the book, Noni says *Prep – A Class Act* is both welcomed and sorely needed.

"The kinds of activities she outlines should be part of every school day for children at all levels of primary school," Noni says. "It's no use wondering what we can do to help our troubled teenagers. By the time they reach adolescence, all we can do is provide bandaid solutions to kids' feelings of alienation and inadequacy.

"Prevention at a young age, through imaginative, interactive and thoughtful play, is far more effective.

"I urge teachers to read this book with an open mind. The exercises are simple to incorporate and, as Valerie outlines, have benefits right across the spectrum of study. Their inclusion into your daily routine will reward you with more attentive and co-operative students, who will be less inclined to initiate conflict and more likely to co-operate and empathise with each other. That is what the arts do – they are not a lifestyle – they are life."