Actors set stage for boost to learning

Linda Morris

THE five-year-olds of K1 at Lewisham Public School are making a forest with their bodies. Arms stretch high to become the canopy while other children ball up like rocks on the forest floor.

Each child is nominated as an explorer and, one by one, they pick their way through the tangle of legs and arias.

“What did you feel like?” asks Georgia Adamson, an actor with the Sydney Theatre Company. “Scared,” says one child.

“What’s another word for scared?” Adamson says. “Really, really, really, really scared,” offers another child.

Adamson suggests other descriptive words to fill the gaps in vocabulary: “What about frightened, terrified or petrified?”

This is lesson two of a six-week professional development program in which primary school teachers work with a professional actor to use drama in the classroom.

The theatre company’s innovative school drama program began last year and has expanded from five to 16 schools, with the aim to improve literacy and develop critical and imaginative thinking, interpretation, and comprehension using children’s literature.

“These are not acting classes and they are not drama classes,” Adamson says. “It’s all about teaching the teachers the skills of drama so they can be incorporated into the classroom. We devise a series of exercises specific to a text that gives the kids the opportunity to feel the book.”

K1’s teacher, Tina Simou, asked Adamson, one of four actors participating in the program, to focus on developing expressive language, as well as speaking and listening skills. So when the children rocket into imaginary space they land on planets made of ice, water—and pizzas.

The school drama program was developed using the work of Robyn Ewing, the University of Sydney’s professor of teacher education and the arts, who wants to use the creative arts, especially drama, to enhance children’s reading, writing and oral skills and take children “beyond the literal text” to greater understanding and meaning.

The program was intended to redress the feeling of many teachers that they were not well-equipped to embed drama in what was an already overcrowded curriculum, Professor Ewing said.

An evaluation of the pilot program in five inner city schools in 2009 found that teachers had noted an improvement in students’ narrative writing skills and increased confidence to participate in the classroom, while teachers felt empowered to incorporate more drama in everyday classroom activities.

“Sadly the arts have been incredibly undervalued and underused in curriculum, particularly primary school curriculum, despite unequivocal evidence that the arts enhance all the key learning areas, and the STC is addressing that,” Professor Ewing said.

Teaching teachers the skills of drama... the Sydney Theatre Company’s Georgia Adamson with the children of K1 at Lewisham Public School. Photo: Quentin Jones