Chapter One

Introduction

This thesis is an account of an action research project carried out by a teacher-researcher during the period 2001-2005. In the introduction, I would like to present an overview of the thesis and the way it is structured.

The thesis focuses primarily on my experience trying to answer my research questions:

- How can drama be used as an educational tool to enhance life skills in children with specific learning difficulties?
- How can I improve my practice as a drama teacher?

This reflective-action research is a piece of classroom-based research, in the form of a modular course. The module covered a period of twenty-two months. The aim of the module was to enhance life skills in children with specific learning difficulties (SpLD), in a school in Mumbai. On the principles of life skills enhancement I built the lessons of this module to augment: emotional understanding, self-awareness and understanding of self, communication skill, creative thinking and empathy.

The zeal I had for teaching and to accomplish something for the 'child in need' shaped my research. I felt the need to empower the children in my country, especially the children with SpLD, which I sought to accomplish through a life skills enhancement programme. My allegiance to the drama practice has been enhanced through this action research. Now, towards the end of this research, teaching and teaching through drama has taken on a new meaning for me.

The Cast

Drama is a collaborative group art form, where people transform, act and reflect upon human conditions' (Taylor, 2000: p. 1). This observation stresses on the important feature of my research: the people, who I refer to as the cast. The cast consists of ten children with SpLD studying in a school in Mumbai and me, their drama teacher.

Children undergo great stress when they have to be tested for SpLD. This is especially true for Indian students, a problem I have discussed in detail in Chapter 3. So as

to avert a stressful situation for the children I decided to accept the school's resource room records of SpLD and requested the Principal of the school to select the child who would join the drama class.

The supporting cast consists of the significant others, who played a vital role in my research: the children's parents, class teachers and the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO). In the initial stage they facilitated my introduction to the children. Analysing their interview transcripts and multiple-choice questionnaires, I drew a comprehensive picture of the children (e.g. Appendix 2, p.2). In the latter stages of the research, their comments and my interviews with them validated the children's progress.

The school, teachers, SENCO and the parents gave me whole-hearted cooperation. During the process of the research, a relationship was formed in the spirit of wanting the best for the children. This collaboration was indispensable as I strongly believe that a child's education, whether intellectual, emotional or moral, is a group effort of all those who interact one way or another with the child.

The Theatre

> *'Theatre denotes conflict, contradiction, confrontation and defiance'*
>
> (de Vega in Boal: 1995, p. 16).

This research is a result of the indignation I experienced as I observed the struggle faced by school going children in my country. I believe quality education addresses not only the intellectual needs, but also the developmental needs and aspirations of the students (Dewey, 1897), their ability to think and reason, build up self-respect, as well as respect for others.

There is a discrepancy between the education ministries' agenda and the state of education in India (discussed in Chapter 3). I do not wish to imply no one cares. However, I wish to illustrate that in spite of the good intentions of the academics and the ministries, the children in India are actually traumatised by what is termed as education in modern India.

I was particularly fascinated and impressed by the WHO endeavours (1993, 1993a, 1994, 1999), emphasizing education concerning life skills or psychosocial abilities (see Glossary) that help people think, feel, act and interact as individuals and as participating

members of society. Life skills education is a way to make children resilient, so they can confront the problems they face in life with strength.

I endorse the objectives of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989):

> ' ... the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talent and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; ....the preparation of the child for responsible life in free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes and friendship among all people...' (Article 29)

The objectives stated above stress the importance of enhancing inner capacities in order to meet the challenges of education. It offers a conceptual basis for a life skills approach to education that not only reinforces the definition of life skills as psychosocial abilities, but also proposes an education framework for the essential combination of psychosocial life skills (learning to know, to be and to live together) with practical, psychomotor skills (learning to do).

This research is my refusal to comply with the present situation. It corroborates my belief that we who have received education should stand up and take action. I do not want to be a mere 'spectator'. I want to, in Boal's (2000) words, be a '*spect-actor'.. 'and invade... the stage'... 'I want to occupy* [my] *own Space and offer a solution* …[by] *consciously performing a responsible act.'*(p.xxi)

The Performance Script

Writing a scholastic paper is like writing a drama in that both have to have a form, a design (O'Toole, 1996). The design should sustain the research process, the data, and analysis of the data; additionally it should communicate the writer's aspiration.

I have written this thesis in 'first person'. The raison d'être is that 'I', as the participant teacher-researcher, am central to the thesis. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) make a case for qualitative research written in the first person maintaining that the use of the third person besides being tedious obstructs the '*very realities it is claiming to represent'*(p.338). As a participant researcher, I am a part of the process; my actions, the methods of teaching developed, used, recorded and commented upon are central to the project. The first person narrative style is not only legitimate, but is also essential to record my part in the process.

Using the active voice in my writing is in recognition of my close engagement with the research (Sherman, 1993).

However, there are other voices in this research, that of the children. How to represent them was an issue. A multi-voiced text, a style of writing that is similar to a patchwork (Winter, Buck and Sobiechowska, 1999), is used to sustain all the voices and the reflective process. A patchwork text is a fusion of varied elements imaginatively shaped to make one unit. Winter et al (1999) suggest that a patchwork text includes different forms of writing, which are *'shaped, fashioned and assembled'* (p.2) imaginatively to re-present experience.

Richardson (1994) suggests that writing qualitative research involves experimenting with different literary devices such as point of view, tone, sequencing and metaphor. A combination of rhetorical devices such as vignettes, first-person accounts, poetry, photographs, sketches, in addition to transcripts of the class proceedings and my journal entries are used in this research paper.

I have constructed stories from events that happened in my classroom to represent the growth in my students' and my understanding. Following Evans (1998) suggestions, I have used stories to:

- organize and make sense of data and re-present data analysis;
- record my students and my development over the period of the research;
- express my feelings about my professional situations and my tacit understanding.

My thesis consists of a variety of texts, to acknowledge the different voices in the research. To sustain the patchwork text and additionally alert the reader, I have changed the presentation by using different fonts:

- The main text is written in Times New Roman. All quotations are in italics with single inverted commas. The quotations are within the lines of the text if only of a few words, they are indented if of a substantial nature.
- Signposts are written in italics and act as a guide to the ensuing text.
- My engagements in reflections-on-action are written in **Times New Roman bold.**
- My journal entries are in Verdana. I have intentionally retained the informal linguistic utterances in the entries as the accounts epitomize how I think and converse. I cannot

hope to candidly represent the authenticity of my thoughts and conversations with myself in formal, conventional research language.

- The transcripts (in Times New Roman) are an important part of my research archive, I have identified the speaker in the left column and the date of the recording is inserted below the transcript.

While transcribing the recordings I have used the conventional linguistic forms grounded in the common language used by the children, parents, teachers and me (Psathas and Anderson, 1990) like we'll [we will], can't [can not], and so on. I have used a dotted line (….) to represent a break in rhythm in the interaction, for example when a speaker takes a pause or hesitates and continues speaking, or when no on else takes the next turn immediately (Have, 1999).

Indian words are translated and enclosed in square brackets, for example in Chapter 7 (p.218) the word used by a student –'Atankvadi' that means terrorist in Hindi. I have I have bracket the word terrorist and presented the transcription:

Nihar: Atankvadi [terrorist].

- The students' voices, narratives and diary entries are all written in `Courier News.`

Literature Review

The review of literature initiated the stage of planning, assisted the groundwork of identifying the data collecting techniques and research tools and continued through the writing my thesis. As action research is an emergent research, the literature review had to be a continuous process. As new discoveries were made, new literature had to be reviewed. Green (1999) opines that:

> '...the literature needs to permeate each chapter of the thesis rather than predominantly bound with any kind of literature review and this view is one that is more commonly accepted within action research tradition ' (p.110).

Distinct from the traditional literature reviews, which are given a separate chapter in a thesis, I have integrated the literature into the writing of my thesis, signifying their influence on my thinking and learning. I have acknowledged the academic research as it emerged into the subject dealt with or as it initiated some critical decision during my data collection or analysis. The inclusion of literature in this fashion is more convincing and

valid, at the same time it is also more interesting than in an isolated chapter on literature review.

The Plot

Documenting an action research engaged simultaneously in a range of fields, such as education, drama, socio-psychology, generates an inherent difficulty of representation. Writing each subject and maintaining the complexity and nuance of each field necessitated a change in the normal five or six chapter structure of a PhD thesis. This thesis differs from the general scheme of a typical thesis because of its multi-disciplinary nature and thus is organized into ten chapters.

I have written a separate chapter for each subject e.g. life skills, drama, emotional understanding and empathy. This is undertaken to ensure that each subject, and therefore each chapter, has a pertinent literature review, analysis of the concept of that subject, applicable methodology, appropriate intervention and analysis of the intervention.

In Chapter 1, I am offering an overview of the thesis and the way the thesis is structured. 'The Living 'I'' brings to light the situation of education in contemporary India. Concurring with Ghaye and Ghaye (1998), I see action research as a value-driven activity. Through this preamble I am attempting to reveal my values so that you may see my personal motivations, feel my sorrow and frustrations and become involved with my concerns for the children of my country.

Chapter 2 outlines the research methodology, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures and trustworthiness of the procedures. This chapter is presented in two sections.

Section 1 contains the analysis of the methodology. I have highlighted my research questions in this section and also elucidated the methodology of my research. This section encompasses the rationale for adopting the action research paradigm and reflective practice. Additionally, I have argued for the value of a teacher-research.

In Section 2, I offer an explanation and justification of the methods used for data gathering. My data collection included extensive journal writing, transcripts and photographs of the drama class, diaries maintained by the students and interviews of the

significant others. This section includes the discussions of the analysis of data and the difficulties that I encountered when writing the thesis.

Both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 deal with the reconnaissance phase of my action research. In Chapter 3, I have dealt with Specific Learning Difficulties, focusing on status of special education in India. I have discussed the problems faced by children with mild general learning difficulties (MLD), as all the students in this research are children with MLD. In this report I have used SpLD interchangeably with MLD to imply pupils with MLD to avoid clumsiness.

Asserting the importance of life skills education in Chapter 4, I have described a logical framework of a life skills initiative, its implementation and time frame.

For a moment I take you back to the title of my research: 'The role of drama in enhancing life skills in children with specific learning difficulties in a school in Mumbai: my reflective account'. It is clear my thesis contains two distinct themes that interweave throughout the process of research that involves 'learning life skills' through 'drama'. Both learning life skill and drama happen simultaneously as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Cycles and Skills

Study in drama	Curriculum of Life Skills Enhancement
Cycle 1 *(Jan-Mar 2002)* Games and tableaux	Emotions + Communication
Cycle 2 *(July-Oct 2002)* small group drama	Understanding and coping with emotions
Cycle 3 *(Oct 2002- Feb 2003)* Puppets, Masks Games	Self awareness + Empathy
Cycle 4 *(Jan -Feb 2003)* Dance-drama	
Cycle 5 *(April - Aug 2003)* Games, Whole-group drama, Teacher-in-role	Empathy + Communication skills + Understanding emotions maintenance test
Cycle 6 *(Oct 2003)* Teaching-at-risk	Maintenance of Emotional learning + Self understanding,+ Empathy + Creative thinking + Communication skills

Though learning through drama and life skills education are synthesised in my classroom, they merit separate texts to retain the nuance of their particular fields. Therefore though the following chapters are all 'in the classroom' and concern data collection and analysis of data, they are all written separately.

Each of the chapters 5-9 is a stand-alone chapter; Chapter 5 deals with drama and Chapters 6-9 deal with life skills. All contain a literature review, methods of assessment and the work done in the classroom. Yet they are interlinked because as mentioned above drama and life skills learning occurred simultaneously. Therefore for example in Cycle 2 when the class worked in 'small group drama' they were learning about 'emotions'. The text concerning 'small group drama' is in Chapter 5, and matter concerning emotions is in Chapter 6 –'Understanding Emotions'. Similarly, in Cycle 3 when they worked with a 'pretext' they were learning about 'Understanding Self'. Pretext is critiqued in the drama-Chapter 5 and 'Understanding Self' is dealt with in Chapter 7 with the corresponding title.

Chapter 5 introduces drama as a method of life skills enhancement. Notable drama practitioners, whose works, opinions and techniques are of great consequence to my teaching, are investigated in section 1, of this chapter. I have discussed theatre-in-education and drama-in-education in this chapter and additionally reflected on assessment of drama in schools.

Chapter 5 section 2 describes the six action research cycles of my research and concerns 'working in the field'. In the text I guide my readers into my classroom where I taught, reflected, collected data, analysed it and learnt.

Chapter 6 describes and discusses the importance of emotional understanding. This chapter comprises my struggle with the ambiguity of my teaching of emotions, how I collected and analysed my data.

Chapter 7 is a detailed study of the facilitation of self-understanding and enhancing self-esteem.

Chapter 8, which focuses on empathy, begins with a personal experience that enabled me to empathise with my students. This chapter supports the provision of empathy training to enhance and increase pro-social behaviour in school going children.

Chapter 9 deals with a familiar yet elusive concept: Creativity. This chapter explores the concepts of creativity and instruction in creative thinking.

Finally, Chapter 10 provides the answers to my research questions and recommendations for further research.

<u>Conclusion</u>

My text offers a critical account of the drama methods I used to enhance life skills. However, moving beyond a critique, I have exemplified my classroom practice in this personal account. The prime audience of my research is the teacher; I hope that they can vicariously experience through my writings the activities of my module and find that they can draw from it. My '*self-chosen research*' (Dadds, 1995: p.146) that follows reflective action practice empowered me. I believe personal development leads to professional development. I trust the testimony of my personal and professional development will give confidence to other teachers who hope to research their practice.

Additionally, the aim of my research is to help bridge the gap between research and practice in the field of life skills education. Through my writing I aspire to demonstrate that such programmes can be empowering and thus encourage schools to incorporate life skills education modules into their curriculum. I think institutions such as schools can become inspirations for new understandings for if schools and:

> *'...teachers can begin to think of themselves as among those able to kindle the light Arendt described or among those willing to confront the dread and keep alive the sense of "a possible happiness", they might find themselves revisioning their life projects, existing proactively in the world...'*

> (Greene, 2003a: internet source
> without page no.)

The Living 'I'

> *'Time present and time past*
> *Are both perhaps present in time future,*
> *And time future contained in time past.'*
> (Quartet No1: Burnt Norton, Eliot, 1968)

In this section I explain the processes of my growth and learning which I think are important to understand the personal and professional path of my life. My understanding of education concurs with Whitehead (1989); I believe that 'education is a value-laden practical activity' (p. 45). At this juncture, I see the need of the inclusion of:

- *my personal values as they are the referents to my activities, beliefs and growth;*
- *the contradictions in the field of education in India which lead me to my research;*
- *the explanations of my raison d'être to improve my practice.*

This narrative is directly related to my ontological questions: Who am I? Why am I doing what I am doing? and why do I want to improve my practice? (Whitehead, 2004).

I am akin to a bricoleur (Levi-Strauss, 1966, see Glossary) and it is the pattern I have followed all my life. While I studied commercial arts in college I started modelling, designing sets and costumes for a professional theatre company. I went on to acting on stage, in films and television, became a top model and subsequently went on to becoming Miss India. I was a commercial artiste, a potter and even studied Ikebana (see Glossary). Marriage and children encouraged my ability to handle all the different fields at same time, learning from one field and using that learning to enrich another.

When my children were young, the government of India had started an educational programme with a mission statement 'Each One Teach One'. It meant that each educated Indian could teach at least one unlettered countryman. I was greatly influenced by the philosophy of empowerment through education. Around the same time, I had attended a workshop of theatre-in-education (TIE). Fascinated by the concept of TIE I replicated this

experience as a workshop, which I designed and taught in my children's school. It was an extremely successful endeavour and the participants enjoyed themselves. It was a good learning experience for them and on my part, I was very happy to teach.

Following the success of this one workshop I carried out a few more workshops in other schools. These workshops were usually arranged at the end of the term. When the terminal examinations were over, the children had some free time on hand and the class teachers were too busy to take classes, as they had to correct the examination answer sheets. My workshops were like time-filler and light entertainment. Taylor (2000) writes about a similar experience in his book 'The Drama Classroom'. Everybody was happy; the children were happy as they had a good time with a celebrity-teacher, the school administrators were happy as they had 'arranged something creative' for the students and I was happy because I had managed a successful teaching experience.

Nevertheless, I soon began to find the workshops empty; I had started questioning 'what more?' This was the beginning of my questioning. However, this act of questioning merely existed in my mind. Although I understood I was not doing enough as a teacher I did not have the fortitude to say it out aloud. This was not 'it', there had to be more.

As a result I moved away from teaching through drama and enrolled myself for a course to learn to teach children with SpLD. I registered for this course because I desperately wanted to teach, not merely teach, but teach well. To teach well, I believe, I needed formal learning in education.

With a distinction certificate in hand I was set to teach English to the children with SpLD. However, my tutor suggested I try working with drama.

Oh no! I thought, not drama. I have a strong dislike towards the idea of training kids to act; that is what I thought was expected of me. As a mother of two school going children, I am critical of parents who allow their children to become 'child-actors'. I do not support the idea of children skipping classes to perform. I did not want to train children to become actors. Therefore, I fell back on what I had learnt in the TIE workshop, at any rate that was more appropriate than teaching 'acting'.

At a remedial centre, I taught a child with dyslexia who had low self esteem and saw him becoming more and more confident. A child with severe Aphasia was not only motivated to try to talk, but also became 'the grandmother' of the group although she was

actually six years younger than the other children. A slow learner, who did not want to act, took charge of all the property required for a performance. Here I realised that by not working through drama I was denying many children a 'wonderful' learning experience.

> *'Having made a discovery I shall never see the world again as before. My eyes have become different; I have made myself into a person seeing and thinking differently'* (Polanyi, 1958: p.143).

However, there was still this nagging question 'what more?' I did not have the confidence to incorporate drama in the curriculum in a meaningful way. I did not want to become a recipient of somebody else's curriculum and copy some expert's class format. I had to do something as my teaching schedule lacked spark or the 'wow' factor.

With two children studying in the Indian education situation I could experience from 'inside' the stress it created. In spite of the progressive thinking in the school renewal movements in India I saw the students of my country bogged down by what is termed as 'education' in modern India. The children's backs breaking with the sheer load of the books they carried and their minds breaking with the weight of knowledge they had to encompass (Express Newsline, 1999; Suryanaryan, 2005; Ali, 2005). Their hearts breaking when they could not keep up with the pressure or because of the insensitive treatment meted out by the knowledge-givers (Bombay Times, 1998, 1999;Sharma, 2003; The Asian Age, 2005; Sen, 2005; Times News Network, 2005, 2006). Young and fragile, I think they need help.

I experienced helplessness as a mother and as a teacher. As a mother I wanted to find a way of making school days less stressful for children. As a teacher I wanted to improve my practice. This appreciation of improving my practice worked at two levels; I wanted to become a better educator for professional excellence and to find a way to make the Indian children more resilient. If modern times brought modern knowledge, surely it should yield modern ways to deal with the chaos created with this kind of progress.

I began my research because I believe that an educated citizen should be a valued part of the Indian educational community and that everyone has unique skills and abilities and can be partners in the educational process. Additionally, citizenship of a democratic country implies not only possessing rights, but also exercising genuine responsibilities (Winter, 1998: p. 374). We as learned Indians have to exercise our responsibility to bring about change in the educational system in our country.

By way of researching I could raise the level of my education; additionally I could make a contribution to the mental health practice in the wider community. I see this research as a support to all children. Not as a study of the situation, but as a way to make their world a better place in which to live. The aims of this research are to help the children to overcome adversity and become resilient, to learn how to face the problems they have to deal with in their young world, to empower them so they can grow into well adjusted adults. These are lofty goals but they are at the heart of what I am trying to achieve. I know my limitations as well as the limitations of my study. However, as Lord Krishna says to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita (Glossary):

> *"You are qualified simply with regards to action, never with regards to its result.*
> *Do your duty to the best of your ability, O Arjuna, having abandoned attachment,*
> *undertake action…evenly disposed as to their success or failure"*

<div align="right">(Bhagavad Gita, 2:47-48)</div>