

The role of drama in enhancing life skills
in children with specific learning difficulties in a Mumbai school:
My reflective account

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Abstract

This thesis is a reflective account of an action research project set in a drama classroom. It is a multi-voiced patchwork text which is created and built imaginatively to represent my students and my experience in the drama classroom.

On one level it deals with the question ‘How can drama be used to enhance life skills in children with specific learning disabilities studying in a school in Mumbai?’ On the second level it is related to the question ‘How can I improve my practice?’

This research is concerned with a teacher’s capacity to recognise and realise the opportunity of an alternate reality in teaching. The reality of loving and caring for the students. The reality of an empathetic, compassionate, just and democratic classroom.

The foundation of this study was laid when I saw the children in need suffer due to insensitive teaching practices and uncooperative peers and family. I was concerned with the trauma faced by students in the prevalent educational setting in India. I believe that what I do in education should help make changes for the better in our society. Life skills enhancement, in my understanding, was a way to alleviate the stress the children experienced seeing that life skill education promotes mental well-being in young people and behavioural preparedness.

As a drama teacher I see drama as tool for education. It is a natural vehicle for explorative and experiential learning. The aim of my thesis is to describe and reflect on the learning process and the context in which it occurs. I present the critical points with close analysis of the choices made by me as I taught my pupils using drama as a learning medium.

Additionally, this study investigates the influences of action research on my practice and the impact of engaging in the stages of action research which provided me with a methodical structure for implementing and analyzing the teaching and the learning process. This defined structure guided me through systematic and conscious data collection, data analysis, and reflection. The data is composed of classroom observations and transcripts, a collection of the students and my work and interviews with their schoolteachers and parents.

The main objective of this research was to enable a gain in positive behavioural intentions and improved psychosocial competence in children. This was accomplished through augmentation of creativity, emotional understanding and development, improved self-esteem and a notion of the joy of autonomy to enable the students to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

‘You must be the change you wish to see in the world’

Mahatma Gandhi

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Glossary

(in alphabetical order)

- Bharatnatyam: is a classical Indian dance form.
- Bhagvad Gita: is a great philosophical work that played the same role in the history of India, as the New Testament did in the history of countries of the European culture. Both these books powerfully proclaim the principle of Love-Bhakti as the basis of spiritual self-perfection of man. The Bhagavad Gita also presents a number of different Yogic and Vedantic philosophies, explaining the meaning and purpose of life and existence. Philosophical truths are expounded in the Bhagavad Gita in the form of a dialogue between Krishna- incarnation of God and His friend Arjuna before a military combat.
- Blocking: is a theatre term, which refers to the precise movement and positioning of actors on a stage. The director usually determines blocking during rehearsal, telling actors where they should move for the proper dramatic effect and to ensure sight lines for the audience.
- Bricoleur: a bricolage is a pieced together set of representations fitted to the specifics of a complex situation, thus producing an emergent construction that changes and takes new forms as different (or new, invented, pieced together) tools, methods and techniques of representation and interpretation are added to the puzzle. The term indicates '*a pragmatic, strategic, self-reflexive and aesthetic practice*' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000: p.4). The '*bricoleur*' is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project (Levi-Strauss, 1966: p.17).
- CICSE / SSC / CBSC boards: are the three different boards, which hold external examinations for the tenth standard examination. They are equivalent to the O level/ GCSE level in UK.
CISCE Indian Certificate School Examination (central board).
SSC Secondary School Certificate (state level board).
CBSE Central Board for Secondary Education (central board).
- Diwali: is an important Hindu festival.
- Downstage: is the area on stage that is nearest to the audience.

- Gandhiji's three monkeys: is a statue of three monkeys that was treasured by Gandhiji. This statue is a model of three sitting monkeys, one with its eyes covered which suggested see no evil, one with its ears covered which meant hear no evil and the third with its mouth covered that conveyed speak no evil.
- Ikebana: is the art of beautifully arranging cut stems, leaves, and flowers in vases and other containers that evolved in Japan in the 16th century.
- Laterality: the ability to tell the difference between the left and right side of the body.
- Maharastra: a name of state of India, of which Mumbai is the capital.
- Praxis: a term used by Aristotle, is the art of acting upon the conditions one faces in order to change them. It deals with the disciplines and activities predominant in the ethical and political lives of people.
- Psychosocial competence: *'is a person's ability to deal effectively with demands and challenges of everyday life. The most significant interventions for promotion of psychosocial competence in schools are those that enhance the child's own coping resources and competencies. This is most often done by teaching of skills; such skills are referred to as life skills'*. (WHO, 1994: p.7)
- Sidecoach: calling out a word, or phrase or sentence, giving instruction during the activity without stopping the action. Sidecoaching must guide players towards focus, creating interaction, movement or transformation.
- Standard (Std.): is the term used in India for 'Year' in school, i.e. Fifth standard or 5 Std. is equivalent to Year Five in UK.
- Statue: is a game played by children in India where one points a finger at the person one is playing with and says 'statue', thus expecting the person to freeze till one gives the person permission to move.
- Street theatre: is a term used to denote plays performed on roads and grounds trying to spread awareness regarding contemporary political, social, economic situation.
- The light 'Arendt' described: in the book *Men in Dark Times* (1968) she maintains, we still *'have the right to expect some illumination...and such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works,...'* (p. ix).
- 'The miracle of relationships': Greene (2003: p. 8) *The Arts and the Search for Social Justice*.

A Happy Classroom



(starting from the bottom right)

Lali, Me, Sarla, Snehal, Nihar, Pratik, Samir on the right and Mukul on the left.

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