

The Value of Drama and Theatre for Young Children

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Abstract

How we interact with other people is crucial to our lifetime achievement and contentment. The value of drama and theatre for young children seems to lie on the fact that it provides personal expression and catharsis of inner desires. It helps the child to distinguish between reality and fantasy. The purpose of this article is to reinforce the value of drama and theatre for young children. Drama traditionally was used for entertainment and education both. Research suggests that children play a vital role in the change of the society and they require an opportunity for the regular participation in the on-going activities of the society and thus to meet the needs of the children, society shifts itself. Drama is a discrete skill in itself, and therefore it is offered as a 'subject' in secondary school. It improves intellectual development and creativity through interaction and imagination. However Drama is also a tool which is versatile and applicable among all the areas of the curriculum. This paper will propound child centric approach while discussing these subjects.

Keywords: Drama and theatre, values, childhood, emotional, social, imagination

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Traditionally, the field of drama for children in India has been linked more with pedagogy than with theatre studies. The theories are developed more from education than theatre performance. "Drama" and "Theatre" usually refer to the progression and the production respectively. Researchers found that play is an ideal way to support children's budding knowledge and that play boosts children's narrative skills. The great thing about drama and theatrical art is that it entirely involves the complete persona of the child. Particularly, it amends character, attitudes and emotions. By and large, the child centric value of drama seems to lie in four basic purposes:

- 1) It delivers personal appearance and catharsis of inner wants;
- 2) It helps the child to differentiate between truth and imaginary;
- 3) It offers social adaptation for children.
- 4) It improves intellectual development, specifically creativeness.

According to child centric psychoanalytic theory, drama is viewed as a mechanism whereby children can deal with particular sources of real life rigidity. The events represented in dramatic play have a special relationship with the events in the real world (Fein, 1987). Today's children are confronted with some fear-provoking surroundings. The mystifying and violent activities they see around them may become a part of their thought and imagination and it is an adult's role to support children and comprehend their world. Isaacs (1938) also believes that

through dramatic play the child becomes competent to resolve their inner conflict and concern. The young children imitate the activities and characters of those around them. It is a basic human reaction, mainly in early childhood. The desire to play is essential to the human experience and it is constructivist in spirit. Drama for young children offers an occasion and methods of understanding and making sense of the world. It acts like a bridge between the child's world and the adult's world. This spirit of imitative nature that children naturally construct is often unnoticed on the ground of dramatic theory.

In contemporary society, vision and imagination are important skills, not only for the artist, but for people of all sects during their life. The theatre forms a mirror and critically examines society and the human experience, and delivers an opportunity for pupils to extend their understanding of humankind and values, both past and present. The key concept in the field of classroom theatre is the difference between Creative Dramatics and Children's Theatre. Creative Dramatics (or Creative Drama) was officially defined in 1978 by The American Association of Theatre for Youth, as "an improvisational, non-exhibition, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact and reflect upon human experience". Lev S. Vygotsky (1978) believed that children develop an understanding of the surroundings through play and that adults could inspire this expansion by proper involvement. He observed drama as a means for socially assisted learning and scaffolding. Adults should undertake variety of roles when acted together with children such as observer, co-player, and sometimes, play leader. Neuman (1992) reports that playful way of learning guided by adults contribute to the acquisition of literacy skills.

As children try out many models of their world, interacts with them transform them, and engage themselves imaginatively, they gain knowledge and develop many resources for recombining the familiar to produce the new. When dealing inventively with their world, the novel and speculative, the expression of imagination, the symbolic transformations in which objects and actions are used in new and unusual ways, are often evident during the dramatic play time of children. Children have a creative spirit which is evident in their freedom to do, to make,

to be. They play to express themselves. The young child by means of the dolls, blocks and equipment with which she/he can pretend to be keeping house, building a bridge, going for a walk, doing the marketing, or landing an aero-plane, has many opportunities to be creative. Sutton-Smith (1971) supports the theory here presented in that he suggests that there are four basic modes of knowing 'imitation', 'exploration', 'testing', and 'construction'.

Thus: "imitation... relies on mimicry of the externals only and is usually all that those of inferior status have available to them. Exploration is at a slightly higher level of information control because the knower now gets to handle and manipulate the objects of knowledge. In testing, the knower tries out what he can do himself and thus validates his own personal control over the situation" (Sutton-Smith, 1972). These types of knowing may be arranged transitively. It is apparent that the first three modes of knowing (imitation, exploration, testing) are related to the creative process, through the activities of reciprocal interaction, transformation and imagination, respectively.

The willingness to 'suspension of disbelief', a term attributed to the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge which refers to the ability to be taken metaphorically into a fictional world, begins early. Ask any group of adults what games they played as children and without exception they reply, 'mummies and daddies', 'doctors and nurses', 'shepherds', 'shops', 'hair dressers' and so on. This ability to suspend disbelief sometimes begins before the age of 2 and often carries on until children reach puberty, and in some instances beyond. However, there is a tension between the classroom environment and what adults think is necessary to suspend disbelief. This has led the development of drama within early years of education to become marginalized. A teaching strategy used occasionally to 'service' other subjects. Often drama is seen only as a useful device to encourage personal, social and emotional development. This is indeed strength of its use but there is no evidence that children who are given (sometimes very powerful) experiences in a dramatic situation assume those roles in everyday life. They start to bully people around them if they have ever played a part of a bully in any drama. The drama will only give them an experience of such behavior. The kind of behavior modification needed for

such individuals is the province of 'drama therapy' and should not be the purpose of educational drama.

Then what is the purpose of engaging children in dramatic play? If it is not going to change behavior or attitudes in any fundamental way, why engage in it at all? This is to misunderstand this mode of 'play'. When young children engage in theatrical art, they take on and manipulate identity, and not just of stylized characters – they 'play out' the ideas and characteristics of their culture and their environment. The short scenarios undertaken in the role play area, the playground or in the home, sometimes complete with actions, clothing and language represent both shared knowledge and individual experience. Bruner (1986) states:

"We know the world in different ways, from different stances, and each of the ways in which we know it produces different structures or representations, or indeed, 'realities' . . . we become increasingly adept at seeing the same set of events from multiple perspectives or stances and at entertaining the results as, so to speak, alternative possible worlds"

Children instinctively engage in drama to develop their ability to understand this perspective. All mankind shares the ability to be imaginatively creative but the education and environment in which children find themselves can increasingly cut them off from their creative selves. These make them adjust to a factual, materialistic world. It is especially important for children of minority faiths and cultures, often finding themselves in the alien environment of an early years setting or school, to be able to 'play' in their cultural understanding. They need opportunities to practice what it is like to be an adult, telling stories of their lives. These activities help them to keep in touch with their cultural heritage. Through their 'pretend' stories they are making sense of their surroundings.

American researcher Shefatya (1990) proposed that there were six developmental elements associated with dramatic play.

These are:

- (I) Imitative role play: child assumes a make-believe role and uses imitative action and/or verbalization.
- (II) Make-believe with regard to toys: materials or toys are moved and used as characters.
- (III) Verbal make-believe with regard to actions and situations: use of narration as substitute for actions and situations.
- (IV) Persistence in role play: a period of at least ten minutes is spent in developing role play.
- (V) Interaction: at least two children play together within the context of the story.
- (VI) Verbal communication: there is dialogue related to the play.

Greta Fein (1984), another North American psychologist, carried out a series of studies in which she linked the effect of socio-dramatic play with a child's acquisition of social perspective-taking skills and self-development.

At this point it is important to make a distinction between socio-dramatic play and thematic-fantasy play. Whereas socio-dramatic play involves pretend activities such as laying the table, putting doll to bed or cooking on the pretend oven, thematic-fantasy play consists of imaginary scenarios and fictional narratives. During thematic-fantasy play children create imaginary world for themselves and their toys based on the plots of stories they know, what they have watched on television, films they have seen or from their own imaginations. Two American psychologists, Dorothy and Jerome Singer (1990), carried out a study into pretend play and the development of children's imaginations and found that there may be a link between two modes of thinking. Bruner (1986), who first described these two forms of thinking, defined them as the 'paradigmatic mode' and the 'narrative mode'. He explained paradigmatic thought as being involved with logic, sequencing and the ability to be analytical. Narrative thinking, on the other hand, is more creative and requires the construction of real or imagined events. The role play area would appear to be encouraging socio-dramatic play whereas the more complex activity of interactive story-making requires children to engage in thematic fantasy play, although this

distinction may not be as clear-cut as it first appears. However, it could be said that for the development of language skills and creative imagination, thematic-fantasy play is more important than socio-dramatic play. Nonetheless, it is essential that children are encouraged in both these kinds of activity in the classroom.

There is no doubt that watching children engaged in socio-dramatic play can tell us much about their emotional well-being. In the safety of pretend play, children will let us witness their fears and anxieties. Through engagement in thematic fantasy play, we have an even more powerful medium. By working with stories developed by children (interactive story-making), we help them to develop their creative thinking and an understanding of emotional tensions and themes. We also allow children to understand the relationships of power, status and cultural rituals within their society. All types of fantasy play promote language and communication skills and appear to be important in the development of gender and cultural identity.

Conclusion:

Young children use their imagination and transformational activity, modify whatever they find in their environment, and create new things, objects and activities and so new environments. In this way, through the reciprocal interaction of environment, transformation and imagination, creativity can be discerned. The young children use all these conditions, (interaction, transformation and imagination), in their dramatic play, as they try to represent a great deal of what they come to know of their world.

According to McCaslin (1987), modern education and creative drama share common values. Dramatic activities promotes the following, educational and social values:

1. Creativity and aesthetic development.
2. The ability to think critically.

3. Social growth and the ability to work cooperatively with others.
4. Improved communication skills.
5. The development of moral and spiritual values.
6. Knowledge of self

Shmukler (1985) suggests that the value of drama can be recognized and included in educational provision for even intellectually-gifted children, so that their mental development may be enhanced. Dramatic play can be integrated into other curriculum areas in Infant Education such as maths, science, language with strong benefits, as research has shown. There are good reasons for believing that dramatic activities are fundamental to emotional, social and intellectual development, some means must be found in infant education to motivate it (Griffins, 1983). Indeed, the value of drama lies in the opportunity that it provides for the young child to express his/her inner desires and to escape from his/her egocentricity, and to develop emotionally, socially, intellectually and artistically.

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