

## Theatre: A Quintessential Medium in the Education of Children

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### Abstract

Learning a language must be an involuntary activity for learners and to make the process more effective and affective it must be participatory in nature. If the students bring in their emotional involvement in the learning process then they can comprehend concepts from the kernel level and sustain that information in their psyche forever. It is in this context that the relevance of theatre in education has gained importance through significant studies worldwide. A brief overview of Theatre in Education (TIE) examines the theoretical basis for TIE in general and a few studies on the significance of TIE recorded in articles have been reviewed in this paper. Theatre enlightens the children of their role in a society and also their relation to it. It is essential for a person to enjoy the work he/she does in order to produce the best result out of it. In this regard, theatre is employed by teachers, educationists and researchers as the most appropriate medium for the children to develop an enthusiasm in language learning. This paper reviews the role of theatre in education especially in language education, highlighting the significance of children's theatre for recommending the scope for further studies, on how TIE may be used for effective language learning and developing theatrical skills amongst children.

**Keywords:** theatre, education, TIE, children, language learning.

### Introduction

Innovative techniques find no limit in educational fraternity where the academia always looks to introduce something more effective in teaching. It's been realized that the emotional involvement of the students is essential for them to comprehend the things to its deeper level. The introduction of theatre in education is a novel approach to involve children both physically and emotionally in education on issues related to the society, health and well being. Theatre as a medium of education employs entertainment to attract the child's attention and evoke enthusiasm in their minds to listen attentively and identify correctly the educational messages being portrayed.

Theatre can make the children realize that they are essentially natural beings with abilities to think creatively, technically and socially. It provides a better platform which could be rather called a workable model that helps the children to analyze and assimilate the nature of the social world in which they themselves form a part of it. Famous scholar, Bond's words on theatre in education is worth mentioning here in this context.

"TIE lets children to know themselves and their world and their relation to it. That is the only way that they can know who they are and accept responsibility for themselves. TIE is carrying out the injunction of the Greeks who founded our democracy and our theatre: they said know yourself – otherwise you are a mere consumer of time, space, air and fodder." (Bond 1994)

One of the important reasons for the introduction of theatre in education was the philosophy that education must be child centered. It was the eighteenth century French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau whose philosophy and ideas found greater reflections in the twentieth century. According to Rousseau's philosophy the primary concern of education must be to study the child and analyze his spontaneous impulses. Rousseau advocated the idea of "return to nature" in education and as per his idea, a child must be able to learn by himself and school education must only be a guiding factor for his interests. Famous academician Dewey (1896) thought about introducing techniques for the children to achieve mastery of the elementary academic skills and knowledge through direct experience and active participation. He was too apprehensive of the concept of imparting education through book learning and also the problem of how a teacher can introduce varied subject matters which will bring value and significance to the life of the child. Thus the introduction of theatre in education found to be the most innovative of all the methods used in academic arena and it also solves a few of the apprehensions that the scholars had on effective teaching. There indeed prevails a confusion regarding the terms drama and theatre when it comes to the academic fraternity. Though used interchangeably there is a fundamental difference between the terms, drama and theatre.

### Difference between drama and theatre in education

Drama could be defined as a structured activity that presents a story to the audience through action and dialogues to explore human conflicts and tension. It helps the audience to broaden and deepen their experience. In a school curriculum drama is both a method and a subject. When it is considered as a subject, it involves the detailed study of dramas written by well known playwrights such as William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. While considering drama as a method, it involves various elements of bodily movements, voice modulation,

improvisation and role play to aid the personal development of the student. Drama could be in the form of written text where it could be read while sitting in a closet or while travelling. Only when the drama is performed before a set of audience using appropriate tools and paraphernalia, it becomes a theatre.

When it comes to the theatre in education, most often it is a method of work used by some experienced actors or teachers who prepare appropriate materials to be presented in schools. The theatre could even run by a private organization conducting theatrical performances in schools and other educational institutions, purporting the academic aspect of the medium. Hence the term theatre is most appropriate to be used than the term drama in the academic arena. Though there is a fundamental difference in both the concepts, the final end achieved through both the medium in academic fraternity is almost similar. Being a most innovative medium in education, theatre has got a lot of advantages.

### **Benefits of theatre in education for the children**

The most elementary purpose that the incorporation of theatre in education serves is but entertainment. Children love to play be it with peers, adults or with pets and through this the children assimilate the world around them. Theatre is a make belief world and children could easily get in to it as they are more emotionally quick in suspending the disbelief. Hence theatre is the appropriate platform for the children to learn things easily through psychic and physical involvement. Theatre provides the children an outlet for self expression and ultimately helps in the development of imagination, creativity and artistic awareness. Through theatre children could develop their self-confidence and self-respect. It helps in enhancing the fluency of speech and expression and also in developing the social and mental awareness.

Theatre is a platform where children experience the spirit of co-operation. To co-operate with each other in a team and to accomplish a goal in a given period of time is an essential quality one should develop. To achieve this one requires skills for listening, problem solving and also skills in managing the time. Participation in theatre makes the children develop all these essential qualities in much more effective manner. Theatre provides a cathartic effect to the children where it creates a space for them to deal with the real life problems virtually and also to vent out their frustrations and inner struggles. Theatre trains the children to become emotionally strong prepares them to take up the complex roles of adult life at a younger age itself.

One of the great merits of theatre is the element of freedom that it provides to the children. In a theatre, the children are free to discover their own hidden potentials. A teacher should not demonstrate the children how to enact but must only observe and motivate them in experimental learning because any interference by the teacher would curtail the freedom of the children in expressing themselves in their own way. This will make the children enjoy the activities they do especially in a platform like children's theatre. Though children's theatre acts as an important medium particularly in language education, it is a little different from the concept of theatre in education.

### **Difference between theatre in education and children's theatre**

Theatre in education is different from children's theatre where the former intends more than mere entertainment to a large audience. Though theatre in education incorporates some children's theatre plays, its end aim is more academic. June Mitchell, Director of Bowsprit Theatre in Education (1974-76), differentiates theatre in education and children's theatre like this:-

“They have a separate function. ... We do children's Theatre Hopefully we do good Children's Theatre i.e., we don't make assumptions that were made when I worked in a Children's Theatre company that everything has to be fantasy and everything has to be entertaining, lightweight, mindless, visual wallpaper. In Theatre in Education commitment to the subject matter is greater.” (John Mitchell 1974-76)

Theatre in education provides the space for improvisation for the children where there is enough liberty for the children to enact the roles and express themselves when compared to children's theatre. Children's theatre often uses plays already written for the children often based on fantasy and illusion. The performers have the liberty to devise the play and more often fails to develop a commitment to it.

One of the pioneers of theatre in education, Caldwell Cook believed that “telling can only be the servant of trying, not its substitute.” He realized the child's love of play as a stimulus and a starting point to learn. According to him, “the natural means of study in youth is play, as any one may see for himself by watching any child or young animal when it is left alone. A natural education is by practice by doing and not by instruction” (Caldwell Cook 1914).

### **Various forms in Theatre assisted Education**

Since theatre is identified as a powerful medium in imparting education and awareness to the children, there are a few forms of theatre that are found more effective in educational purpose.

#### **1) Puppet performed theatre**

Children are more emotionally attached with the animated figures. They could easily develop a sense of intimacy

with animated figures like dolls and puppets. They talk to them, play with them and hence for the children, puppets and dolls mean more than mere animated figures. This adherence of children for puppets and dolls could be effectively utilized in the education of the children.

Out of a few forms of theatre, puppetry has been used as a clinical tool in the children's education. Puppet theatre is highly influential in informing the children, issues regarding health education, nursing services etc. puppet theatre becomes far more effective in presenting concepts such as character identity that may find difficult to present through actor performed theatre. It is humanly difficult to demonstrate the children health problems caused by malnutrition, where the puppets could be used to demonstrate the abnormal human physical condition and there by evoke a sense of alertness on health issues among the children. Hence puppet theatre is one of the powerful medium in imparting information for the children.

## 2) Actor Performed Theatre

Actor performed theatre is influential in developing a sense of realism among the children and is highly effective in enhancing the language skills of the children. In the participatory theatres, children are made to participate in the theatrical performance and through this medium, learn the language skills, pitch, modulation and also appropriate body gestures through practical involvement. Since the theatre is activity oriented, language teaching becomes far more effective in this medium. Children learn the nuances of the language not by passively listening to but through active participation. Actor performed theatre is also a useful medium to remind children about the health risk behaviors such as smoking and consumption of alcohol. With the help of this type of theatre the attitude of children towards drugs and alcohol could be changed and could also help them lead a safe and healthy life. There is indeed a fundamental difference between puppet theatre and actor performed theatre where the former most often influences the attitude and knowledge of the children where as the later affects the behavior of the children. The words by renowned scholar Jensen could be aptly quoted here in this context. "The real driving force behind dramatic arts is what it does for the emotional, physical, and cognitive abilities of the student..."(Jensen, 2001).

## A Brief Review of a Few Articles Discussing the Significance of Theatre in Education

In her article titled Theatre in Education in the Context of Educational Drama, Christina Perez Valverde of Universidad de Granada, explores the possibility offered by Theatre in Education and Drama in education. She defines both the concepts in the introduction of the article and purposefully uses the expression Educational drama, since the term directly signifies plays intended to a specific age group and those plays exploring the school issues. She explores the genesis of theatre in education as a movement originated in Britain during 1960s and that became a model for projects in many other places in Europe. She concludes her article by mentioning the theatre of the oppressed initiated by Augusto Boal mentioning its noteworthy contributions.

A few professors of the Edith Cowtan University, namely Ms. Stacey Waters, Ms. Helen Monks, Ms. Jennifer Ayns and Ms. Shane Thomson prepared a paper titled, The Use Theatre in Education (TIE), A Review of the Evidence, in the year 2012. In this paper they begin their overview with an overview of the theatrical basis for the Theatre in Education. They also evaluate the role of music in theatre production and also describe the participatory techniques for children in Theatre in Education programmes. They conclude their paper by recommendations on how TIE could be utilized in educating children about the health topics and life skills.

Francis Rifkin, in his paper titled The Ethics of Participatory Theatre in Higher Education: A Frame Work for Learning and Teaching discusses the advantages of participatory theatre in education. His intention before writing the paper was to create a set of ethical guidelines for use in teaching and also to expand the possibilities of classroom teaching. In this paper he defines participatory theatre as a medium that is used to cover various practices such as community theatre, workshop theatre, role play etc. According to the researcher's observation, participatory theatre is internationally associated with certain popular and radical theatre forma such as young people's theatre, forum theatre (theatre for the oppressed), theatre in education and also theatre for development.

## Conclusion

Learning is an endless process and what matters at the end are not the risks that one has taken in pursuing the knowledge rather the enthusiasm and pleasure that one has experienced in the same. Using theatre as a medium in academic curriculum provides such moments of happiness in learning where they could cherish those experiences whole through their life. It is not only that theatre can provide a real life experience in the learning endeavor, but it also helps in developing many other essential skills and in this paper, a few of the benefits that theatre can provide to the learners are described along with the description of certain forms of theatres used in the theatre in education. The paper aims to suggest the uses and benefits of introducing theatre in education for children especially to hone their language skills. The same medium though not extensively employed in India, especially in certain rural areas, is now by the time been employed as the most important medium in education in many of the European countries. Hence it is high time for the authorities of education in India to make theatre as

an inevitable medium in every educational institution to make the learning process of children more realistic and active.

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