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

Swaroop Rawal

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University’s requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Date-May 2006
Coventry University in collaboration with University of Worcester
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
Acknowledgements

There are a number of people who have played an important role in the process and creation of my dissertation I would like to express my sincere appreciation to them.

My Director of Studies, Dr. Philip Chambers, my Guruji, without whose help, advice, and encouragement I would have not been able to complete my study. Guruji stretched my thinking, expanded my ways of knowing and seeing. An Indian folklore suggests that one’s Guru ensures protection such that even the wrath of the Gods are abated…I unequivocally thank Guruji for the security he provided all through my research.

Dr. Stephen Bigger and Dr. Yamini Suvarna, for their advice and support throughout this study. Significantly, I recognise that appreciation for their guidance cannot be expressed in merely a few words.

Dr. Tony Ghaye, for introducing me to reflective practice and action research and for his critical comments that have been valuable in seeing this research project become a reality.

My critical friends, Dr. Nanette Smith, Dr. Jorunn Elidotir, Dr. Anjali Chabaria, Dr. H.L. Kalia and Dr. Harish Shetty provided on-going support throughout the process of this research. The continual dialogue with them, both through discussions and writing kept me reflecting and transforming as I examined my practice.

I would also like to express my genuine appreciation to my friends for their unending support Hema, for helping me organise my audiotapes, photographs and papers and locating them whenever I misplaced them.

Aarti and Sonal for lending a hand with my transcripts and helping me choreograph the annual day dance–drama.

I would like to express my immense gratitude to all these people, as well as to my family, my husband, Paresh and my sons, Anirudha and Aditya for their untiring support and patience. I thank my mother, Mrudula and father, Bachu for inculcating in me the belief that I could achieve anything that I set out to do in life.
Table of Contents

Abstract ii
Acknowledgments iv
Glossary x
List of Tables xiii
List of Figures xiv

Chapter One. Introduction
Section 1
The cast 1
The theatre 2
The performance script 3
Literature review 5
The plot 6
Conclusion 9

Section 2
The Living ‘I’ 10

Chapter Two. Methodology
Section 1
Starting with action research 14
A rationale for using a qualitative methodology 16
Teacher researcher 19
Reflection 27
Critical incident 30
Dialogue 32
Living educational theory 34
The emergent paradigm of my research 38
Post script 43

Section 2
Selection of the research site 46
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of data collection</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical issues in data collection</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patchwork text</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narratives</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Three. Specific Learning Difficulty</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of specific learning difficulties</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Indian milieu</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My students</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive education</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelioration</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Four. Life Skills Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of mental health</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do I start?</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time line</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking life skills education and drama</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Five. The Laboratory of Drama</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions and possibilities</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The players and the platform</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The hullabaloo</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama for understanding</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section 2- In the Classroom</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 1 As the story goes</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A series of shocks</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 2. An unshaped hunch</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 3. Using a pre-text</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cycle 4. A critical event 145
Cycle 5. Teacher-in-role 153
Cycle 6. Teaching at risk 159
Summary 168

Chapter Six. Emotional Understanding

Section 1
Emotions 172
A labyrinth 173
The analytical quest 176

Section 2- In the Classroom
Learning about emotions- Step1-9 178
Discussions 203

Chapter Seven. Understanding ‘Self’

Section 1
Why we need a clear concept of self, and how it can help 206
My focus 208
Aims and rationale 209

Section 2- In the Classroom
The uniqueness of ‘me’ 210
A flicker of colour 214
Annual program 217
Assessment 222
Deepening understanding 226
In which Sarla becomes the magician 230

Chapter Eight. Empathy

Section 1
Understanding empathy 232

Section 2- In the Classroom
Kanha’s story 236
Empathy training 241
Chapter Nine. Creativity

Section 1
Understanding creativity 248
How to assess creativity? 249

Section 2- In the Classroom
Shifting points 252
Two stories and Nihar 253
Reflection-on-action 257
Classroom atmosphere 258
Reflection 262
A shift 264
Moving on 267
Nihar’s story 268

Chapter Ten.

References 270

Appendices
1. List of Names 1
2. A Snapshot of Child-2 2
3. A Snapshot of Child -9 12
4. A Snapshot of Child-4 22
5. A Snapshot of Child-5 28
6. Teacher’s multiple-choice questionnaire 39
7. Parent Interview 42
8. Children’s work sheets 44
9. Self Assessment sheet 49
10. Journal 10.6.2002 51
11. Assessment The Annual Program 54
12. Assessment The Annual Program (Scores) 55
13. Assessment The Annual Program (Part 2) 57
14. Teachers’ comments after Annual Program 58
15. Creativity Rating Scale 59
16. Plan of Class 4 60
17. Blind Walk or Trust Walk 61
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).

A Happy Classroom

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

List of Tables

1  Table 1  Cycles and skills.  7
2  Table 2  Effects of stress on the child with SpLD.  71  xii
3  Table 3  Levels of intervention of mental health programme.  77
List of Figures

1. Fig. 1  Model of effects of life skills education.  
2. Fig. 2  A Drama Continuum.  
3. Fig. 3  Alone at home.  
4. Fig. 4  By my face.  

75  
168  
189  
202