

PREPARATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS (ECE) VIA DRAMA AND ACTING

Zainal Abd Latiff
Universiti of Malaya
zainallatiff@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: *This two-part paper will try to address how Early Childhood Educators (ECE) can benefit from drama and the ways and means of how an Actor prepares. The first part of the paper will deal with the rationale for utilizing drama and the preparation of an Actor to prepare ECE. It will also discuss the symbiotic relationship between the fields of Education and Drama, thus the Educator and the Actor. The second part of the paper will try to demonstrate how the ECE can be prepared through the ZAL Method of training. Actors are trained to obtain several Awareness – Awareness of Self, Awareness of Other Selves, Awareness of Space (Surrounding), Awareness of Movement, and Awareness of Tempo (Timing). In order to achieve the above Awareness, an actor goes through seven components of exercises, vis-à-vis Relaxation, Concentration, Imagination, the 5 Senses, Voice, Movement, and Intellect. In short, the Actor/Educator will be trained to be aware of his/her Physical, Mental, Emotional, and Spiritual Quotient. After this talk, it is my sincere hope that ECE will become more aware of his/her potentials and qualities as an Actor/Actresses (Performer), and take further steps to be a better ECE. In the long run, teaching and learning will be fun. Educators will enjoy educating, and learners (children) will look forward to Learning.*

Keywords: *drama, theatre, acting, movement, education*

INTRODUCTION

“The precise function of drama is to lead the inquirer to moments of direct experience, transcending mere knowledge, enriching the imagination, possibly touching the heart and soul as well as the mind.”

Brian Way

Rationale

Why prepare the teachers via Drama and the Acting? My answer will be Why Not? My argument will be i) Teachers are Actors/Actresses or Performers, and ii) there exists a close relationship between Education and the Arts (in our context today, it is Drama/Theatre or the performing arts). We can therefore benefit from the preparations an actor/actress goes through, to enhance the teaching skills needed by ECE.

- Teachers Are Actors. Acting means:
- i. to act out a character
 - ii. to be someone, other than oneself
 - iii. to pretend

- iv. to imitate
- v. to assume a role

If we look at the above verbs, doesn't the teacher in the classroom carry out those actions? The teacher may play different roles, vis-à-vis facilitator, manager of instruction, leader, and change agent. When teachers are in the classrooms they take on a different sense of being, sense of management and sense of enthusiasm. It is important to acknowledge this change in perception. As a matter of fact, aren't we all actors? We play different roles in our lives. Depending on the context and situation, we may be fathers, mothers, wives, husbands, teachers, brothers, sisters, workers, bosses and paymasters. Even Shakespeare says that 'the world is a stage, and we are mere players'. If we think about it, we are not 'acting' but we are 'being' or 'living it'. As a matter of fact we are the real actors, as opposed to the actors on stage on tvs and films. Our acting is real and we mean it. We are accountable to our acting/actions, and answerable to the Director/Creator.

Relationship between Drama and Education

What is Drama?

- i. Drama is an art form highly accessible to human beings. In education, it is a mode of learning that challenges students to make meaning of their world.
- ii. Drama is the enactment of real and imagined events through roles and situation
- iii. Drama enables both individuals and group to explore, shape and symbolically represent ideas and feelings and their consequences
- iv. Drama has the capacity to move and change both participants and audiences and to affirm and challenge values, cultures and identities
- v. Drama includes a wide range of experiences, such as dramatic play, improvisation, theatrical performances, film and television drama, and includes both the process and presentation of drama
- vi. Drama draws on many different contexts, from past and present societies and cultures

An Education in Drama

Drama in the school curriculum can develop students' artistic and creative skills. It can also provide knowledge and skills that are transferable to a variety of artistic, social, work-related contexts, including living. An education in drama can:

- i. humanize learning by providing lifelike learning contexts in a classroom environment setting that values active participation in a non-threatening, supportive environment
- ii. empower students to understand and influence their world through exploring roles and situations
- iii. develop students' non-verbal and verbal, individual and group communication skills
- iv. develop students' intellectual, social, physical and moral domains through learning that engages their thoughts, feelings, bodies and action

- v. enable students to become critically reflective members of the community through their engagement in dramatic contexts relating to identity, societies, cultures, ideologies, gender, time and change
- vi. give students knowledge and understanding of drama and skills in drama to participate throughout life in one of the oldest yet most dynamic art forms
- vii. give students experience in and understanding of the other arts

Drama is living and living is drama. There exists a close relationship between these two entities. Brian Way, in his book *Development Through Drama*, says, *"Indeed, it is true to say that drama, so far from being new, is closely inter-woven in the practical implementation of both the spirit and substance of every Education Act that has ever been passed, especially the idea of the development of the whole person."* He went on to say that *"...there is not a child born anywhere in the world, in any physical or intellectual circumstances or conditions, who cannot do drama."*

If we look back at the origins of drama, one of its functions is 'didacticism' (to teach). Drama had penetrated the schools since the early days of the Sixteenth Century England. Juan Luis Vives published his 'Exercitatio' in 1539, a collection of dialogues composed according to rhetorical principles. Throughout, Vives draws attention to the importance as well as the pleasures of observation, and reveals the importance of games and advises the conditions for meaningful drama. Then came Caldwell Cook with his *Playway Method*, Peter Slade with his dramatic activities in his book 'Child Drama', Brian Way with his book 'Development Through Drama', and Charlotte Chorprenning with her book 'Creative Drama'. Later followed by other drama educationists such as Dorothy Heathcote, Winifred Ward, Geraldine Brian Siks, Gavin Bolton, and theatre activists like Bertolt Brecht and Augustus Boal. The large continuum of performing arts range from Play to Theatre. In between these two poles there is Dramatic Play, Creative Play, Creative Drama, Creative Movement, Drama In Education, Theatre In Education, and Children's Theatre. As a reminder, ECE should be aware of the different forms that I have mentioned above, and to know their characteristics and salient features before using them as teaching tools.

Play as a Early Form of Drama

"The Drama Core builds a bridge between play and learning. In the years before kindergarten, when blankets thrown over tables became dangerous caves and parents' old clothes grew into brave, new explorers, playing at drama taught us about being human. Beginning with kindergarten, the drama core helps us learn how to work together when we are people in a place with a problem to solve. Walking in the shoes of others helps us understand others and participate successfully in the making of a neighborhood - be it of people next door or people around the world."

Children learn through play (and play is the early beginning of theatre). The philosophy of ECE is largely child-centred, thus an emphasis on the importance of play. Play provides children with the opportunity to actively explore, manipulate, and interact with the environment. The quality of learning that young children experience is of crucial importance for their future. Play encourages children to investigate, create, discover and motivate them to take risks and add to their understanding of the world. It challenges children to achieve new levels of understanding of events, people and the environment by interacting with concrete materials. Hands-on activities create authentic experiences in which children begin to feel a sense of mastery over their world, and a sense of belonging and understanding of what is going on in their environment. This philosophy follows with Piaget's ideals that children should actively participate in their world and various environments so as to ensure that they are not 'passive' learners but 'little scientists' who are actively engaged. Piaget also emphasized imitation – the use of the body to represent and enact to pretend, as the child's first and most basic step into the symbolic world. Play is a very important and special part of childhood. It allows a child to experiment with the world around him and the emotional world inside him. To many it might seem like mere child's play but there is a lot of work going on behind the scene like skill building, problem solving, overcoming physical and mental challenges, etc. Playing with products made especially for the preschool children helps a child in building self-confidence, encourages independent learning and clears his concepts. For the development of their fine and large or gross movements, for the growth of the child's eye-hand coordination, it is extremely important for him to 'play' with the natural things around him – sand, mud, grass, water and other 'props'.

Educational Theories and Implications to Drama and Child Development

Imitation is a natural and spontaneous 'stage' of early child development whereby a child is beginning to investigate the world by imitating it. (One of the theories of the origin of theatre is Imitation). Piaget notes that "To express things with gestures, the child must have a mental image of what it is he or she is acting out. Acting out in turn strengthens the "mental image", inferring that this reciprocal process is a natural way of learning. In his book *Play, Dreams and Imitation*, Piaget describes play as allowing repetition of discovery. By repeating the discovery, children are able to solidify their experiences and enjoy them for the pleasure gained. A child will frequently substitute a pencil-box for a cup, or even drink from a cup that is not there. The higher level of play is characterized by rules that the children establish themselves, organizing for the teacher their own involvement. Rules and planning such as this are frequently adaptable, or a starting point for drama. In terms of Interpersonal Intelligence, drama in school has the potential to carve clearer understandings of why events have occurred such as war, famine and revolution. Research filtered through emotion as well as intellect creates understanding of how people involved in these situations feel. This is where DIE (Drama In Education) Connecting Howard Gardener's Kinaesthetic Intelligence to drama, mime and dance can communicate ideas and emotions through movement and gesture. Drama

applied in schools can assist children in developing and refining ability to use and interpret body language; a vital social skill. Drama can enhance children's expressive range of mobility, providing an outlet for emotion. Repression of emotion can have negative effects on the growth of personality. Boleslavsky, a famous actor says, "the gift of observation must be cultivated in every part of your body, not only in your eyes, through the process of reenacting, we become ten times more alert" This statement is useful from an educational perspective, because if children re-enact a concept, (which may be from enacting the 'splitting of atoms' to the 'metamorphosis of a butterfly'), that concept will be understood better. Educationally, drama can improve cognition through developing an understanding from a greater perspective than just the conventional intellectual. According to Jacques Lecog (a French Master) "Movement can go deeper than words." Drama, notably creative drama, creative movement and mime are 'emotion-centred' approaches. In order to communicate satisfactorily in life, the individual must feel free to express themselves. According to T.S. Elliot, "The less a person understands their own feelings, the more they fall prey to them".

Enhancing Teachers' skills via the Preparation Of An Actor

So, we can safely say that Teaching is Acting. Teaching should be entertaining, meaningful, stimulating and enlightening. No wonder teaching is so tiring. In comparing the Teacher and the Actor, they do share many aspects that are the same. Some of the common traits are Confident, Creative, Energetic, Versatile, Resourceful, Reactive. If we take a closer look the classroom environment, we are able to sort out some of the theatrical elements that are present in the classroom setting : Space (set), Props (teacher's teaching aids), Script (lesson plan), use of voice, facial expression, body language, body movement, and costume. According to the ACEI (Assoc. for Childhood Educational International) Position Paper on the Preparation of Early Childhood Education Teachers, it was suggested that teachers should be prepared in the four areas of General Education, Foundation of Early Childhood Education, Child Development, and Learning and Teaching Process. For our own purpose today, I would like to highlight certain aspects pertaining to the Arts. Under the area of General Education, out of the ten required training preparations, four of them are related to drama/theatre. Under the Learning and Teaching Process, it was suggested that in order for the teacher to be familiar with instructional strategies, the program should include techniques for:

- i. Creating learning environments that foster creativity, healthy self-concepts and regard for others, and intellectual and physical growth in balanced proportions
- ii. Integrating play, a growth process, as an integral part of a child's intellectual, social/emotional, physical and aesthetic development
- iii. Implementing a program of learning for young children that includes all curriculum areas such as language (oral and written, literature, reading), mathematics, use of technology, science, social studies, performing and visual arts (music, dance, theatre, art, film) and physical education

From the above, we could see that an ECE has to go through a certain program of training for him or her to do the job well. They must possess the knowledge, skills and sensitivity to interact successfully with not only the young child, but also parents, guardians, para-professionals, community organizations and others whose action affects children. It is in this context where I think, the Actor can help the ECE to prepare oneself so that he/she would be able to perform convincingly well in the classroom.

How An Actor Prepares

To the actor, unlike the artist or the musician, his/her main instrument is the body and the voice. Therefore in order to be able to perform well, he/she has to take care and train the instruments. One cannot master the art of acting in a day, a week, or a year, without endless hours of practice. Some basic fundamentals that are required of an actor is:

- i. Concentration – Learn to concentrate. Work at it under most adverse circumstances, until your train of thought cannot be disturbed.
- ii. Observation – Acquire the habit of being observant. Study human nature. Watch the actions of others as they go from class to class, while they shop, while they watch a football game, or when they meet at the bus stop to talk. Note what people do with their hands, how they tilt their heads, how they hold their feet, shoulders, knees and arms. Study the mannerisms of different types: very active people, others who are slow and methodological, aggressive people. And ultra-precise individuals. Observe and remember your observations.
- iii. Cooperation – Acting is only one phase of a great enterprise which includes not only actors but also the director, stage-hands, publicity workers, prompter, stage-manager and of course the audience.
- iv. Desire for Improvement – An essential element for the student actor. The actor should not become self-satisfied with their work. He/she should not lose the burning desire to improve at every at every possible opportunity.
- v. Inborn Qualities – There are certain qualities which are largely inborn. Students without these innate qualities must strive to develop them. A well-developed imagination, an acute ear, ability to express emotionally. An actor can be taught form, principles, and techniques, but he cannot be taught emotional expression: that he must acquire for himself. None of these qualities can be omitted from the art of acting.
- vi. Memorization – A strong memory to recall past incidents and the ability to memorize dialogs.

The Actor has to train to be aware of Self, Other Selves, Environment, Movement and Tempo. I wish to share here with you, how I trained drama students in 'Acting' at the School of Performing Arts at USM in Penang. After teaching for about 25 years, I have come up with a training method which I name it the ZAL Method. After several years of teaching, I realized that the training of an Actor uses a lot of movement or physical training. In this context, the ECE could also benefit from movement training, to enhance his/her teaching skill. At the University of

Wisconsin, Professor A.C. Scott uses Tai Chi to train his acting students. Professor Phillip Zarrili uses Kalaripayattu and the Kathakali movements in his theatre classes. His philosophy is that "all bodies become eyes". Tadashi Suzuki from Japan invented the Suzuki Method, which derives from Kabuki and Noh theatre (The Art of Stillness - In the stillness, there is movement). Other western schools uses modern dance, ballet, gymnastics, acrobat, fencing, juggling, and the latest being trapeze.

Training the Body

In Malaysia, I try to infuse the several martial art forms that are available here. The rigorous approach to exercising heightens the mind-body connection. This integrated psycho-physical infrastructure training methods which many training methods explore, are recognizably the approaches of Constantine Stanislavsky and Jerzy Grotowsky. I borrow ideas from various forms of Pencak Silat, Tai Chi, and Chi Kung. I even invented "Tai-Lat" (a combination of Tai Chi and Silat) for acting exerciisees. Physicalization of an Actor is important for the preparation of an Actor before going up on the stage. Through movement training, some of the benefits derived are:

- i. Self-Confidence
- ii. Awareness of Self – strength and weakness
- iii. Stamina – Energy - Breathing
- iv. Body Coordination
- v. Body Control
- vi. Body Posture
- vii. Awareness of Space – Levels – Directions
- viii. Concentration
- ix. Memorization
- x. Sense of rhythm and tempo

Vocal Training

Other than the physical aspect, I use the 'Solfá Ladder' for the training of the voice, in terms of breathing and pitch. Besides the sight reading, I also use simple songs, to enhance the skills in pronunciation, intonation, articulation, and projection.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would like to reiterate that the teacher can benefit from the preparation an actor goes through, because he or she is a performer. I will go on a step further by proposing that ECE to take classes in Drama and Acting because it will enhance the skills of the ECE in his or her carrier as an educator.

REFERENCES

- Ball, Charles. (1971) "Thoughts on Music as Aesthetic Education" in *Toward an Aesthetic Education*. Central Midwestern Regional Educational Laboratory, Inc.

- Best, David. (1992) *The Rationality of Feeling*. London: The Palmer Press.
- Buzan, Tony. (2000) *Head First: Ten Ways to Tap into Your Natural Genius*. London: Thorsons.
- Callery, Dymphna. (2001) *Through the Body*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Dodd, Nigel and Hickson, Winifred. (1971) *Drama and Theatre In Education*. Heinemann, London, 1971.
- Fleming, Mike. (2003) *Starting Drama Teaching*. Great Britain: David Fulton Publishers.
- Jackson, Tony, ed. (1980) *Learning Through Theatre: Essays and Casebooks on Theatre in Education*. Manchester Univ. Press.
- Mc Caslin, Nellie. (1980) *Creative Drama in the Classroom*. New York: Longman.
- Mc Gregor, Lynn, Maggie Tate, and Ken Robinson. (1977) *Learning Through Drama*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Robinson, Ken, ed. (1980) *Exploring Theatre and Education*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Siks, Geraldine Brain. (1977) *Drama With Children*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Slade, Peter. (1958) *Introduction to Child Drama*. London: University of London Press.
- Smith, James A. (1978) *Creative Teaching of The Language Arts in the Elementary School*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
- Via, Richard A. (1976) *English in Three Acts*. USA: The University of Hawaii Press.
- Ward, Winifred. (1957) *Playmaking With Children*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Way, Brian. (1957) *Development Through Drama*. London: Longmans

