

ENHANCING THE PERFORMANCE OF LEARNING-DISABLED CHILDREN BY DINT OF THEATRE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In schools, teachers come across pupils who have diverse abilities and special needs. Some of the learners achieve high and some may lag behind in their learning. They may face learning problems such as difficulties in listening, speaking, thinking, reading, writing, spelling, reasoning, calculating or social skills. It is a great challenge on the part of teachers and trained educational specialists to deal with those children with learning disorders through the adoption of different educational strategies.

In the current scenario, theatre education has emerged as an innovative strategy to mitigate the gap between educators and the educated. Theater education is beginning to be seen as a unique hybrid of performance and child-centred learning. This educational medium initially aims to acquaint teachers with the concepts of learning and using the experiential method in teaching. This kind of synergy uniting classroom instruction and theatrical tools provides for students educational environment in its most effective way as it is both visual and auditory in a sophisticated fashion.

Theatre education has been designed in many institutions across the globe to broaden the base of knowledge, hone skills, facilitate age-specific learning etc. Many theatrical companies today specialize in performances designed to cater to the needs of children with learning disabilities. It is seen that four components go into the success of this programme thorough familiarity with the system of education, the use of experiential gains, openness to innovative ideas and presence of experts from the world of theatre. So theatre education seeks to create a wide range of learning opportunities across the whole curriculum in an inclusive setting.

Keywords: Learning Disabilities, Theatre Education, Theatrical Tools.

INTRODUCTION

Education is considered to be a powerful instrument in developing the basic skills that are needed for learning. These skills include the various language skills and numerical skills which are needed to lead a successful life in the society. Various skills such as listening, thinking, speaking, understanding, reading, writing, reasoning, calculating etc are essential to achieve in academics.

In most schools, one can come across certain children who have diverse learning abilities and special learning needs. Some of the learners achieve high and some may lag behind in their learning. They may face learning problems such as difficulties in listening, speaking, thinking, reading, writing, spelling, reasoning, calculating

or social skills. It is a great challenge on the part of teachers and trained educational specialists to deal with those children with learning disorders through the use of innovative educational strategies.

For education to be fruitful, various innovative methods of instruction are to be implemented. Theatre education is found to be an effective instructional method which provides scope for equality of opportunity, individual differences and dedication to striving for high standards.

Learning Disabilities

Many children, in spite of having average or above average intelligence perform poorly in academic activities. These children may face difficulties in the basic academic skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic.

These difficulties might be the result of a learning disability (Kumar & Raja, 2008). Learning disability is nothing but difficulty in learning which hampers the ability to perform well in academics. Learning-disabled students often find it difficult to acquire the basic skills which may pervade their performance in curricular and co-curricular activities. These children suffer from severe learning problems in the same way as experienced by mentally handicapped children or physically handicapped children in terms of their mental abilities or physical abilities respectively.

According to the National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities (NJCLD), learning disability is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities (Nakra, 1996). Learning-disabled children exhibit a wide range of individual differences. No two individuals with learning disability are alike. One may perform well in arithmetic but poorly in language skills while the other may perform well in spoken and written language and so on.

A learning disability is found across all ages and in all socio-economic classes. Learning disabilities may affect individuals differently at different stages of life – early childhood, elementary school years, adolescence and adulthood. Students with learning disabilities may be identified at any age, but most of them are first noticed in early elementary school grades. (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 2007). There are different kinds of learning disabilities such as *dyslexia* (difficulty in reading and spelling), *dysgraphia* (difficulty in writing), *dyscalculia* (difficulty with mathematical calculations), *dyspraxia* (difficulty with acquisition of patterns of movement), *dysphasia* (difficulty in speaking and understanding) and so on.

A learning disability is not a type of mental retardation as mistaken by many people. Learning disabilities do not include problems that are primarily the result of intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbances or visual and auditory disabilities. Children with learning disabilities have near average, average or above average intelligence but they are unable to acquire and use

information efficiently because of weaknesses in memory, attention, perception, language and motor problems. Learning disabilities are intrinsic to the individual and may affect learning and behaviour in any individual, including those with potentially average or above average intelligence (Raja, 2002).

There are different symptoms of learning disability with which children face severe difficulties in learning. The various characteristics that individuals with learning disabilities manifest are delay or difficulty in understanding or using spoken language, difficulty in reading, spelling, handwriting and written expression, difficulty with mathematical concepts including calculation, time and space, problems with attention, memory and perception, difficulty with processing of information, difficulty in socializing with peers, problems in understanding nonverbal communication like body language etc (Saravanabhavan, 2009). Children with learning disabilities often show signs of frustration and low self-confidence. Learning-disabled children have problems with social relationships and have unreasonable self-expectations. Also they appear to be lazy and emotionally disturbed. They also exhibit various other characteristics such as frequent shifts in emotional moods, distractibility, inattention etc (Neilson, 2002).

Theatre Education

Theatre education is a medium of theatre for exploring various issues with young pupils. It evolved as a specific form during the 70s and 80s. It is used to describe any work by professional theatre workers in an educational setting. Theatre education is an educational strategy which has been recently introduced in many educational institutions. It has been introduced as a novel method which aims to unite the classroom education and the theatrical concepts. The aim of theatre education is to use theatre and drama to create a wide range of learning opportunities for the young pupils. Also it aims to mitigate the gap between the educators and the educated. It provides opportunities for the development of academic skills such as reading skills and mathematical skills as well as literacy and social skills (<http://dictionary.babylon.com/Theatre%20in%20>

education).

Theatre education has emerged as an innovative strategy in the current educational scenario. The term theatre education includes everything from the education of academics in the history of theatre and drama to the training given to young children in theatre appreciation. School drama education varies from a subject in its own right to integration as a learning methodology across the curriculum in many elementary classrooms. Professional touring theatres for young audiences and a few resident companies in major cities educate through curriculum and social issue plays (<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0007946>).

Theatre education seeks to create a wide range of learning opportunities across the whole curriculum. This type of education is considered as a unique hybrid of performance and child-centred learning (<http://www.flipcart.com/contemporary-theatre-education-roger-wooster-/1841501700-3zx3f99zg6>). Theatre education is considered to be an educational medium which involves the active participation of all learners. It is active in the sense that it engages students' attention, energy and creativity. It is also collaborative since it paves way for students thinking and learning together (<http://wiki.projectbamboo.org/display/BPUB/SN-0072+Pedagogical+recipes+for+theatre+education>).

Theatre education provides a conducive learning environment to the pupils in its most effective way as it is both visual and auditory in a sophisticated fashion. It integrates educational technology in the teaching and learning processes through the use of a variety of techniques to enhance teaching and learning. It helps the students to engage themselves in meaningful learning experiences. It considers individual differences and provides opportunities to all individuals to learn and contribute to their potential (<http://www3.Ashland.edu/services/cardev/documents/TheatreEducationK-12org.pdf>).

Theatre education programmes involve many activities that train students to develop the basic skills needed for

learning. Theatre education paradigms include both theoretical training and practical training and take into account different approaches to teaching. In performing-arts education the various modalities of learning can be classified on the basis of the learning environment and the type of interaction between the teacher (director) and students. Classroom work consists of activities of listening, observing, writing, discussing and reading that involve the interaction between one or more teachers and one or more students (<http://wiki.projectbamboo.org/display/BPUB/SN-0072+Pedagogical+recipes+for+theatre+education>).

Theatre education starts with an educational topic or debate and develops a show around it. There are a number of companies across the globe that specializes in producing theatre to be performed in schools. Such productions often have drama workshops attached and may involve the pupils in the performance itself. Since the groups specialize in educational work, the performances are designed with particular aspects of the curriculum in mind. Some will always link their work to a particular key stage while others design various projects for different ages (<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/library/theatreineducation/>). Theatre can empower individuals and communities. It is a force that can unite, uplift, teach, build communities, inspire and heal (<http://www.artslynx.org/heal/theatre>).

Theatre education greatly helps to improve academic performance. Drama activities improve reading comprehension and both verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Students who participate in drama often experience improved reading comprehension, maintain better attendance records and stay generally more engaged in school than their peers who do not experience the arts. Also it was studied that students who took courses in drama study or appreciation scored, on average, 55 points higher on verbal component and 26 points higher on maths component than their non-arts classmates (<http://www.aate.com/content.asp?PI=23&sl=69&contentid=69>).

Dramatic activities are now perceived as having several distinct functions in the classroom. The primary focus is on

the use of creative drama and improvisation to aid in the child's mental, physical and emotional development. Theatrical devices are often used in the classroom to teach academic subjects such as history. Professional theatre companies tour to schools presenting plays which may be on the reading curriculum or which may be used to promote discussion on social or health issues. In secondary schools, plays are still presented with the educational intents of teaching language skills, fostering self-confidence, and developing a knowledge and appreciation of drama and theatre (<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0007946>).

Numerous studies have demonstrated a correlation between drama involvement and academic achievement. The findings of the study on exploring the drama lives of children of adolescent boys highlight the values of involvement in creative activities, freedom of choice, the assumption of responsibility, working on collaborative enterprises and the development of a sense of competency and implications are suggested for educators to help increase involvement of both boys and girls in drama and theatre work (Bell, 2007). The study which explored how drama techniques affect student learning in the science classroom revealed that drama-based science lessons accommodated multiple learning styles improving students' access to science content and perceptions of their learning experiences and abilities (Alrutz, 2003).

The novel idea of theatre education is to familiarize educators with the concept of learning and using the experiential methodology of theatre to fulfil the educational needs (<http://www.hindu.com/edu/2004/08/16/stories/2004081600070200.htm>). A study done on the possibilities of hope in drama for drama teachers revealed that doing drama in partnership with students maintained or strengthened hope and that repetition and renewal of experiential knowledge together with skill and wisdom in teaching practice sustain and maintain hope (Jacobs, 2003).

A study which examined why students chose to attend the specialized visual and performing arts high school in

central Florida through in depth interviews with two currently enrolled students and their parents revealed that quality of the experiences in schools helped students to determine a career path and that the students saw themselves involved in theatre as professionals or as patrons (Wuertz, 2003). Jackson (2004) on investigating about variables that promote and/or inhibit theatre programme development in public schools studied that there were six variables that inhibit theatre programme development and that there were twenty variables that promote theatre programme development.

Theatre education is used to broaden the base of knowledge, hone skills, facilitate age-specific learning etc. It helps to build a bond between classroom education and theatrical tools which benefits both educators and theatre buffs alike. It takes a four-dimensional vision to theatre education programme successful. The four components go into the success of this programme are thorough familiarity with the system of education, the use of experiential gains, openness to innovative ideas and presence of experts from the world of theatre (<http://www.hindu.com/edu/2004/08/16/stories/2004081600070200.htm>).

Theatre Education and Learning-disabled Wards

Theatre education proves to be an effective strategy for the benefit of learning disabled children. Theatre education with an innovative approach to training and an extensive programme of workshops provides a ladder of opportunity for children with learning disabilities leading from appreciation to participation through personal development to independence (<http://www.Artslynx.org/heal/theatre>).

Research indicates that drama courses and performance have particularly a positive effect on students with learning disabilities. The arts including drama by catering to different styles of learning engages students to actively learn, who might not otherwise take significant interest in academics. Drama activities can improve and help to maintain social and language skills of students with learning disabilities. In addition to building social and communication skills, involvement in drama

courses and performance has been shown to improve students' self-esteem as well as their confidence in their academic / activities (<http://www.aate.com/content.Asp?pl=23&sl=69&contentid=69>).

A study conducted by Kaliski (1978) on theatre workshop for children with learning disabilities discusses the benefits of the workshop including improved oral and written language, self-esteem and self-control. A study done on the impact of drama on children with special needs describes two drama programmes designed for children with specific learning disabilities and based on the needs of these children to achieve and develop a positive self-image (Clopton & Davis, 1979).

By choosing materials and activities suited to their level of learning and by stimulating their urge to bring out their best, teachers can help the pupils with learning disabilities to turn their difficulties into special opportunities to be model achievers. When this category of pupils experience success, their self-confidence level is raised along with their self-esteem which in turn makes it easy and feasible for them to find their way for the attainment of their goals (Kumar & Raja, 2009).

Many theatrical companies across the globe today specialize in performances designed to cater to the needs of children with learning disabilities. There are a number of companies that specialize in theatre education and in addition there are a number of companies that aim their performances at specialized groups. For example, Oily Cart Children's Theatre in UK works with students with multiple learning disabilities (<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingandlearning/library/theatreineducation/>).

Theatre education is considered by many individuals with learning disabilities to be a welcoming and friendly environment. Almost all of the events and activities run by theatre resource are accessible to those with mild or moderate learning disabilities. Such activities usually include activities with strong visual images and actions. The theatre resource with ICT workshop has a range of software applications including symbol writing systems which may help to improve the performance of the

learning-disabled children. Exhibitions and facilitated visits are also arranged for these children which may greatly benefit them (<http://www.theatre-resource.org.uk/index.php?pid=461>). Theatre education may be able to help learning-disabled children by arranging facilitation / personal assistance.

Implications

The difficulties that children face in the learning process have begun to attract serious attention. It has become a real educational handicap and a widespread issue in today's society. It is a great challenge on the part of teachers and trained educational specialists to deal with those children with learning disorders by using innovative teaching strategies. Theatre education as an innovative strategy could be implemented in all educational institutions for the benefit of the learners who face severe problems in learning. It can be certain that those with mild or moderate learning disabilities or those with multiple learning disabilities could enhance their performance in academics through theatrical methods of learning.

Theater education may prove to be a boon for those children with language learning disabilities. It can enhance the performance of such children in communication skills through drama activities. The verbal and non-verbal skills of such academically weak learners can be improved to a certain extent through the adoption and use of theatrical tools. Also theatre education is found to develop the oral and written skills of such learners. Using theatrical methods, dyslexics could be helped to read and spell properly. Also learners with dysphasia can be made to develop their comprehension and speech skills.

Theatre education can also prove to be useful to develop the arithmetic skills of such learners to a certain extent. It may also prove to be effective for those children who have problems with social skills. This educational strategy could help such pupils to develop their social skills through drama programmes. In addition to developing such skills, these programmes helps such learners to maintain a high self-esteem and hence a positive self-image.

The adoption of theatre education as an innovative strategy could create a wide range of learning opportunities for educationally backward learners. Theatre education caters to the needs of diverse learners by adopting different learning styles such as visual or auditory learning styles. Also it helps to enhance the learning of such pupils by using different instructional techniques and thus integrating educational technology in the classroom.

Conclusion

Theatre education is thus found to be an effective strategy for dealing with the learning-disabled pupils. It provides opportunities for collaborative learning, flexible thinking, active learning etc. This type of instruction can be effectively designed to cater to the needs of children with learning disabilities as it provides a variety in learning. Theatre education could create a wide range of learning opportunities for educationally backward learners. It caters to the needs of diverse learners by adopting different learning styles can help engage such disabled children to learn in an enjoyable and meaningful way. Also it helps to enhance the learning of such pupils by using different instructional techniques and thus integrating educational technology in the classroom. It is becoming essential for school teachers to adopt innovative methods of teaching like theatre education to cater to the needs of disabled learners. The use of theatrical tools may facilitate the process of acquiring the various academic skills that are needed for learning. By these specialized approaches to teaching, most educationally challenged learners can be helped to learn normally. It is therefore imperative for such learners to receive the highest quality of education possible.

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