

Children's Theater: An Inclusive School's Venue for Children With Needs to Publicly Demonstrate Their Talents

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Abstract—Meeting the daily physical, mental, spiritual, social, and emotional needs of children with disabilities is already challenging and exploring, discovering, and nurturing their gifts and talents is even more difficult. The practical and limited goal of the parents, school, and community is to just help children with needs be as independent and functional as possible and discovering and nurturing their gifts and talents often takes a backseat, if considered at all. However, MindHaven School has been implementing and evaluating different approaches in discovering and nurturing the gifts and talents of children with needs since 1993 and has proven that Creative Dramatics and the Performing Arts should be essential components of its Inclusive Program. To help children with needs develop their cognitive, non-cognitive, and art skills, the school has a Children's Theater which produces a year-end showcase/play/musical. Utilizing Creative Dramatics, the Performing Arts, and Children's Theater has positively affected the harmony and collective dynamics of the stakeholders of the school. The children's interactions with peers, adults, and materials provided opportunities for holistic development and all adults involved took on the roles of scaffolds, facilitators, and mediators. This study particularly seeks to answer the following questions regarding having a Children's Theater in a school for children with and without needs: 1.) How are the children engaged in Creative Dramatics and the Performing Arts in preparation for it? 2.) What skills does it develop in children? 3.) How are gifts, talents, and skills identified through it? 4.) What innovative teaching approaches are needed to implement it and 5.) What are the perceptions of the involved stakeholders?

Keywords—*children's theater; school play; performing arts; creative dramatics; inclusive school; inclusive program; children with needs*

I. INTRODUCTION

A visit to the theatre has the potential to be a life-changing experience, as well as an opportunity for a unique kind of learning. It can touch the imagination, arouse curiosity, or fire an artistic impulse. Theatre can also be an exceptional resource, linking as it does to so many areas of knowledge: history, geography, language, citizenship, and much more. Learning in theatres has its own skills-set – theatrical literacy and the understanding of dramatic conventions, a specialized

vocabulary, and the ability to sit and watch a performance without distraction.[1]

If a visit to the theater has the potential to a life-changing experience, how much impact would it be if the student is not just a spectator but an actor himself? But to the students with needs, to be a performer more so be the lead actor in a children's theater this is a distant desire & a dream too hard to come true. For them it is going through the difficult process and many times humiliating experiences of rejection, denied opportunities for auditions, & encountering other barriers to their participation in any school performances. Together with abled children, who are more easily chosen as actors in performing arts activities to perform on stage, just being in the cast of a school play is story of feat & wonder.[1]

This experience have brought forth questions which this study aims to answer in a school which has a progressive, Inclusive program: This study reveals the factors behind the wonder of students with medical diagnosis having developmental disorders, with physical, visual impairment performing in children's theater so they can publicly showcase their talents & not just a part of the audience watching their classmates or schoolmates perform.

And why Theater?

One of the most popular forms of entertainment for people even up to this day is a visit to the theater. For centuries people have enjoyed drama, comedy, music, and other forms of entertainment. In fact, the history of theater can be traced back to 6th Century B.C. where the Ancient Greeks were the first to present dramatic presentations.

II. BACKGROUND

A. American Theater

Theater of the United States is based in the Western tradition, mostly borrowed from the performance styles prevalent in Europe[2]. Broadway in New York City is considered the pinnacle of U.S. theater, though this art form appears all across the country[3]. Drama is also taught in high schools and colleges, which was not done in previous eras, and many become interested in theater through this[4].

B. *Children's Theater in the U.K.*

Bennett believes that theatre for children started in the late nineteenth century in Europe and took the form of 'touring companies with dramatizations of folk and fairy tales and the first widely recognized was Barrie's Peter Pan (1904) in the UK. During this time, writers began to write for a specific child-based audience and education was included as part of their philosophy and an important element of children's theatre. This philosophy is supported by Reason who suggests that; Children's theatre "inevitably operates within contexts of education and learning"[5].

C. *Asian Theater*

In Asian theatre, the Noh theatre of Japan has been handed down through families of performers with few changes for hundreds of years while in India's Natya-shastra, there is a major descriptive treatise on music, giving guidance on musical techniques. Some of these techniques were assimilated during the second half of the 20th century by such Western directors as Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, and Eugenio Barba[6].

Children's theatre has been researched by many scholars and the definition of the term varies. Children's theatre is classified as an art form and consists of a performance of largely predetermined theatrical artwork by actors in the presence of an audience of young people[7]. Goldberg's definition of children theatre is a "formal theatrical experience in which a play is presented for an audience of children. The goal of children's theatre is to provide the best possible theatrical experience for the audience" [8]

Children's theatre tends to stress the perspective and thinking of the children and dig deep into their world. Children's theatre tries to trigger and hold the imaginations of its audience for it is through this that they can be taken on a wonderful adventure.

D. *Philippine Theater*

Drama in the Philippines has been a vital part of the lives of Filipinos. Drama-in-schools came about with the establishment of the formal school system during the Spanish and American period of colonization of the Philippines.

Drama in schools was integrated in other subjects such as English, Filipino, History or Social Studies or Music, Art, Physical Education and Health (MAPEH). There are many challenges confronting drama/arts education but despite all these, there is a strong and vibrant tradition of drama in the Philippines for many years now, not only in schools but also in many communities[9].

However, only 2% of children with disabilities (CWDs) are currently able to access educational opportunities and of those who do, drop-out rates are high because of the barriers of accessibility and discrimination they face as reported by Philippine Department of Education. The majority of CWDs in the Philippines grow up without a decent education or access to education in spite of their potential talents and abilities.

It is this challenge which MindHaven school embraces, discovering & developing the fullest potentials of children with needs not only in their traditional academic achievements which is the usual focus of their learning, more so is the opportunity to showcase their gifts, talents & abilities in performing arts with children's theater as their venue, serving as their STAGE not only for the musicale play but as the "window to their hearts desire".

III. RATIONALE

A. *Every Human Being is Creative*

One of the greatest fallacies of modern times is that creativity is limited to a small group of people with particular talents. Most people, the belief goes, don't want to be creative, couldn't do it if asked, and would be very uncomfortable in an environment where creativity was expected of them. This belief is false.

The creative class concept should therefore be understood as neither elitist nor exclusionary. For creativity is the great leveler and diversity is not merely enjoyable; it is essential.

B. *Providing Access for All Students*

The capacity of human beings to create and appreciate the arts is just one of many reasons to teach the arts in the schools. Study and practice in the arts refine students' abilities to perceive aesthetically make connections between works of art and the everyday lives of people, and discuss visual, kinesthetic, and auditory relationships.

Visual and performing arts education should provide all students with opportunities to advance artistically and cognitively, develop self-expression and self-confidence, and experience accomplishment. In visual arts, most production is individualized, different learning styles can be accommodated[10]. In performing arts, the use of ensembles provides opportunities for students of varied ages and expertise to succeed and learn from each other. The use of a variety of teaching strategies (for example, separating students individually, in pairs, in small groups, and in large groups) provides opportunities for everyone to succeed.

C. *Inclusion of All Learners*

At each school level arts instruction should provide avenues in which each student can work at a personalized pace to learn and develop self-expression and self-confidence. Curriculum and instruction may need to be modified or adapted to encourage the successful participation of students with a variety of disabilities and those who excel or have a special interest in the arts.

Arts instruction should be modified to encourage the successful participation of students with disabilities who are usually overlooked if not totally ignored in musical presentation. The advent of theatre for the deaf, wheelchair dance, museum tours for the visually impaired, and access by touch to musical sounds makes the arts more accessible.

Special education staff can collaborate with teachers to plan, suggest, and recommend modifications.

IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This ethnographic case study focused mainly on how MindHaven School applies Brain-Based Learning in its Progressive Inclusive Program[1] using Children's theater as a venue for children with needs to publicly demonstrate their gifts, talents, and skills. Different Brain-based theories by Renate and Geoffrey Caine[1] and by Eric Jensen.[2] were integrated as the foundation for MindHaven School's triad program- Home-base, School-based, and Community-based program.

The role & value arts, be it painting, dancing, or creative dramatics and children's theater in a highly digitized world has been a constant debate in education practitioners. While most educational communities would settle for digital approach in teaching children with and without needs, MindHaven School chose to apply forward-thinking neuroscience findings and it has been forging ahead with its own parallel sets of studies, understandings and conclusions about brain-based education interactions and implication in its program implementation.

But five neuroscience departments at five universities (University of Oregon, Harvard, Univ. of Michigan, Dartmouth, and Stanford) have recently completed projects studying the impact of arts on the brain. Arts and Neuroscience is a new journal that tracks the connections being made by researchers. The recent results suggest that arts are far better than earlier believed. They show that certain arts boost attention, working memory, and visual spatial skills. Other arts such as dance, theater and drama boost social skills, empathy, timing, patience, verbal memory and other transferable life skills. Arts support the development of the brain's academic operating systems in ways that provide many transferable life skills.[1]. The application of brain-based learning & its connection to arts, particularly performing in a school Children's Theater, is the subject of this study.

V. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

Case study method was used in this study. A case study can be viewed as "an in-depth study of interactions of a single instance in an enclosed system" . For this paper, the focus of the case study is on real situations with real people in an environment familiar to the researchers [11][12] The case study is used to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena[13]. Using the case study method allowed for exploration of actions and events over the participants over prolonged length of time in natural setting; providing a deeper understanding of their student teaching life.

B. Setting

This study took place in an inclusive school in Roxas City, Philippines that has included children with special needs since 1997. The school has been continuously permitted to function since 1993 and was nationally recognized in 2003.

The school adheres to a play-based curriculum with lessons, activities, and programs designed for children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength and which integrates principles from education research such as Whole-Brain Learning, Multi-Grade Program, Social-Emotional Learning, Multiple Intelligences Theory, Learning Styles, and Environment-based and Culture-based education, eventually resulting in a curriculum tailored to each child's uniqueness.

C. Participants

A total of 16 participants were involved in the study: five parents, three caregivers, three teachers, and five learners with special needs. All of the participating adults represented a broad range of capability and were exposed to inclusive education system.

The participants were chosen for the study because they are the major stakeholders who are involved in designing, giving, receiving, or administering the program being deliberated[14].

Dan: Child with Autism. Dan is 10 years old and is now placed in an inclusive class. She began her preschool when she was 3 years old. She was placed in PLC1 class (nursery) partial inclusion with one-on-one pull out session. When she was included in all creative arts activities, she would shy away from the crowd and would do something else. Her speech and comprehension was a problem. Since preschool she played various roles on their annual Musical Plays; one of the Ostrich in Lion King Broadway, a fairy friend of Tinkerbell in Peter Pan, one of the Golden Afternoon in Alice in Wonderland, and recently played Hortensia in Matilda the Musical.

Max: Child with Autism. Max began (10 years old) began to attend the preschool at 3 years and 8 months. He was placed in a PLC class (nursery) with one-on-one pull out because of language and cognitive delay. He is now in school for 7 years and included in a Grade 6 class. He enjoyed storytelling, shadow play, puppets and singing during preschool. His first role in musical play is a zebra in Lion King Broadway, an Oompa lomp in Charlie and The Chocolate Factory and one of the big kids in Matilda the Musical.

Will: Child with Autism. Will started in school when his parents began to worry about his self-inflicted pain behavior. He bumps his head against the wall when is he is upset and charge towards his classmates when he doesn't want to join classroom activities. He is now in an inclusive program for 6 years and played major roles in school theater and year end musical plays; Hyena in Lion King Broadway, Kion in Lion King Return of the Roar, pirate in Peter Pan Musical Disney Jr., Bagheera in Jungle Book and one of the Big Boys in Matilda the Musical.

Shein: A child with Down Syndrome. She began her preschool years when she was 3 years old. She has been placed in a partial inclusion with one-on-one pull out because of her speech and cognitive delay and poor muscle control. She has been in an inclusive program for 9 years and enjoys performing in school especially dancing. Some of the roles she performed on their year-end musical play; one of the birds in Lion King Broadway, Poison Ivy in Alice in Wonderland Musical, one of the fish in Dr. Seussical and Squirrel in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory Musical and recently, played multiple roles in Matilda (cook, waitress, and one of the students).

Leo: A child with Autism. Leo has been in an inclusive program for 6 years. He likes to create stories at a young age, with his humorous thoughts, and uncommon ideas he often disrupts classmates during class hours because he wanted to share all he has in mind. His classmates like his stories but sometimes they complain about Leo becoming noisy and annoying. His non-stop talking and easily distracted behavior can bring him into trouble with classmates. Despite of his daily struggle in self-regulation and task completion, performing arts and musical plays always excite Leo to keep himself focused and productive. He played major roles on their year-end musical play; Scar in Lion King Broadway, Captain Hook in Peter Pan Musical Jr., an Oompa Loompa in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Muscle Boy in Circus McGurkus and Judge Yurtle the Turtle in Dr. Seussical, and Bruce in Matilda the Musical.

D. Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

In-depth semi-structured interviews with participants, on-site observations, focus group discussions, and document and archival explorations were used to craft communal and substantive accounts of those deeply involved in the inclusive program of the school. Qualitative analysis comprised of analysis of similarities and differences, coding and categorizing, and constant comparison[15]. Creswell divides data analysis in an ethnographic case study: 1) data managing, 2) coding and developing themes, 3) describing, 4) interpreting, and 5) representing. The researchers enter with data as text and exit with an account or narrative[16].

VI. FINDINGS

CRITICAL PREPARATION FACTORS

Establishing an Accepting culture & creative mindset

1.A. School-Based: Creative dramatics and Performing Arts integrated in academics and Socio Emotional program

a) Academics: Children enjoy all year round classroom activities through creative dramatics while learning basic concepts in Math, Reading, Science, Music and Art and Sensory awareness. Role playing used as a teaching strategy in each subject using objects found in a room or within school. It is through these activities that children are provided with stimulating environments and resources to raise questions to be curious have a desire to play, make and share which what characterized children possesses in their early years. There are

lots of inspirational activities with the engagement and support of peers and mentors who have solid body of expertise and knowledge to support children's learning.

b) Socio-Emotional: Student's Voice for creative expression. These are the stages undertaken:

STAGE 1: Children's Theater Pre-production Stage
Children are free to express their opinion on each scene and are allowed to explore their own interpretation. They can also suggest musical play script or story they like and help in researches of materials (Creative imagination). Moreover they are encouraged to choreograph each musical piece and then incorporated by the teacher's choreography (Artistic Skills). Lastly they are given a chance to design their own stage and participate in props making from collecting boxes at home, to cutting, pasting, hauling and installation. - This is integrated in functional and life skills curriculum.

STAGE 2: Children's Theater Production Stage

This is the most awaited moment for all learners. All the hardwork from physical preparation, to script reading, choreography, singing & dancing practice, musical & dialogue recording, & stage blocking are put to life in view of the big audience. This is their night as each one of them shines in his & her role, animated & alive. The performers are children. The stories were thoughtful, appealing to both children & adults, the sequences were organized, They were story tellers with talents & worth, in a non-threatening environment. No label. The audience were captivated & amazed.

STAGE 3: Post production stage

Evaluation of the musicale presentation is done on different levels: Classroom level among children themselves, facilitated by the teacher-in-charge; Teachers' evaluation; and Parents-teachers evaluation.

1.B. Home-Based : In collaboration with our Education for Sustainable Development Curriculum Recycling and Upcycling) at the start of school year is also the beginning of school-wide campaign preparation for our props and stage making. Each family of our students will be collecting boxes for a year and send these boxes to school for painting and props making. Children contribute in production of stage and props from pasting and cutting, painting props integrated in our visual arts classes.

1.C. Community-Based : Children's and teachers' Choreography are incorporated to come up with a unique interpretation for the musical pieces. Self-assessment and group assessment are conducted on their output after practice in script reading, dancing, recording and props making. Moreover, Self-check and Group Check are also

done on their speech pattern awareness, diction and enunciation practice as they prepare for Self – directed script reading. Abreast with this, caregivers and parents have task schedule to accomplish in making huge paper draft.

MindHaven School SEL (Socio-Emotional) Learning Program of “Bata Mo Bata Ko” (a Filipino saying which translates to “Your child is my child”, harkening to the adage that that it takes a community to raise a child) became a system through which families, teachers and staffs and community people build meaning while developing a communal spirit through dimensions of Having (environments, materials & media), Doing, (activities, relationship, practices) Being (identities, traditions and roles) and Knowing (knowledge, experiences, meaning). Cultures of Creativity (Nurturing Creative Mindsets across cultures [8].

Together with typical brain students, children with needs develop the following skills as they engaged in creative dramatics and performing arts.

DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS

1. Art Skills

- Creativity :

As children learned to overcomes their hypersensitivity or hypo sensitivity to different materials used in drawing, painting and paper sculpting. They are also learning how to think out of the box as they explore various ways of expressing their thoughts, feelings, problem solving skills as manifested in their artwork or in functional use of school materials they have recycled or upcycled. This ends in a collaborative production of stage props to be used for the musicale in school . A team output.

- Acting:

Children who struggle with reading or responding to social cues, began to use facial expressions and body language to show their understanding of the situations which they can’t explain verbally. From being detached or isolated they began to develop facial processing, social cognition & social awareness

- Music:

Exposure to different sounds is an everyday struggle for children with sensory sensitivity like children with autism, so for them to not only learn rhythm and singing, but also lessens the occurrence of meltdown and anxiety doubles the benefits of music lesson.

2. Social Domain and other Non-Cognitive skills

In a class where regular or typical brain students have learned to work together despite their differences, learning to come up with an output either it be a classroom skit or play, much more a school wide presentation like the musical production of children’s theater, the need for collaborative effort is crucial. The year round preparation for this year presentation provide opportunities for children to listen,

respect one another, wait and tolerate their frustrations, be accountable to the group of task and roles assigned to them; learn from their mistakes and developed confidence became committed as a team player in achieving group goals, acquired grit in solving problems like technical recording and props making; strengthened their conflict resolution skills in compliance of the school’s Restorative Justice practice at home and in the community.

3. Mental Domain

While preparation for musical presentation enhanced the socio- emotional skills of children, this intersects with the development in mental domain. The different stages from the pre to post production offered avenues to foster critical thinking and problem solving skills; as they read, understand and analyze literature related to the musical, they become more and more interested in world literature; began to read more stories and become better story tellers.

Their excitement to perform to a large audience helped them built resistance to sensory difficulties iether it be sounds, texture, taste & social interactions. These activities also became learning moments in developing discipline, focus communication skills, being goal oriented and eventually shapes their executive function skills in planning, organizing, monitoring, directing and evaluating their own progress and the group’s performance

4. Physical Domain

Musical Play is a form of performance with physical movement as its integral part. It has to reflect the story with in the context as can be seen in the stage design & props. In every musicale The children dance & sing to the songs of that particular stories like Matilda, Charlie & the chocolate factory, Lion king etc. Likewise from their body movements the audience can tell what the character is thinking even without speaking a word. Their gestures speak for their thoughts & feelings. . Dancing enhances children’s body awareness on their balance, body coordination, muscle control and explore more of what their body can do. Spatial Awareness is also being developed as they can move in their own personal space, respect others as everyone share space or stage so they also become more aware of other children’s personal space. For children with developmental & behavioral disabilities, who used to be outcast or oddballs in school programs or ordinary school activities overcoming these difficulties and now taking the lead roles of musicale play as a yearend presentation, making use of their abilities in singing & dancing not only enhance their physical skills but also increase their pride & self esteem . Children who do not excel in linguistic & mathematical areas are found to be shining singers & performers in musical plays. ...

5. Emotional Domain

The year-long engagement to creative dramatic activities which is integrated in their daily indoor & outdoor lessons slowly helped them develop understanding of their similarity with other children in their physical make up to their

emotional responses. Explicit teachings under Socio – Emotional Learning program prior, during & after musicale plays guide them in facial recognition, perspective -building, conflict transformation in compliance to participatory democracy process of the Restorative Justice Practice of the school are solid foundation for them to begin to understand that each one of them is unique and has talents different from each other. They are also respectful and sensitive towards the needs of children who are differently abled. It is common in school to see” Buddy system” at work. This is pairing of a child with & without needs from daily life skills activities to performing on stage. All these provides a lot of opportunities to be more sensitive to each other’s needs, developing empathy & compassion for those who need it most. This empathy is manifested among others on how kindly & patiently they express or accept feedbacks & deal with criticisms or issues in a peaceful manner. All these taken together composed the ingredients in shaping to transferring of developmentally appropriate self- regulation skills of these students.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is a natural parent’s desire to be proud of their children’s achievement be it in school performance or in other areas of giftedness. However, when children with needs encounter barriers to exploring, nurturing, much more publicly displaying their gifts, talents and skills, parents’ frustration turned to feeling of isolation and hopelessness. Thus, watching their children perform in a school’s theater play and production together with children without medical diagnosis & performing as lead cast or supporting cast is a feeling so indescribable to them. The audience, not knowing these children’s backgrounds are appreciating with amazement how these children can act, sing or dance as good or sometimes much better than classmates who don’t have developmental or behavioral difficulties.

All factors taken together, children’s theater becomes the venue that children with needs can publicly demonstrate their talents in dancing, communicating, and acting as a product of a progressive inclusive program which, first, establishes a Culture of Acceptance (where the child feels sense of belonging) and Diversity (where each child’s uniqueness is respected). Second, there’s the Transformation of Mindset where before parenting is viewed only as a personal responsibility to practicing parenting as a communal to collaborative responsibility.

Third, the practice of Student’s Voice vs. Teacher’s Choice now gives children the confidence to speak out, to self-advocate, which help them overcome stage fright when on stage to perform. Fourth, Data assessment of children’s basic Neurodevelopmental profile, multiple intelligence inventory to interest-based and teaching style is an evidence-based method to help the children, parents and caregivers to guide them in nurturing and fostering every child’s potential so that evaluation of their performance will be the basis of their assigned roles to the musical presentation. Lastly, the Standardized competencies which used to contain and limit the students with needs to what national core standards

demand are restructured to formulate a Personalized Curriculum which responds to the needs, respects the pace, and strengthens the gifts talents and skills of these children. These factors are in synergy as they are consistently implemented in the broader milieu where they can be productive members not only in musical play but also in other areas of their life, not in the future but even NOW. . *The most important aspect of children with needs doing or performing in school plays is that it gives students a chance to shine in an area where they can equally show their strengths not only to their classmates but to a wider audience, It became a public venue to show that they who were told that “YOU CAN’T” can proudly say “ I CAN”..*

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