

Theatre in Schools

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Abstract

Theatrical activities can have a highly important pedagogical usefulness within the framework of public education. Since cooperation is the basis for such activities, they can help improve communal feeling, help students learn various forms of cooperation and practice them, and prepare students for cultured debate and how to reach a consensus through conversation. In addition, they develop verbal and nonverbal communicative tools and improve movement, use of space, music, rhythm, etc. And finally, the joy of stage production strengthens confident self-expression in participating students and increases self-confidence when speaking in public. The success of a creative project can also show students that working together for a common goal is worth it. While theatrical activities are not part of the curricula of public education today, they often exist within school life in the forms of workshops or educational projects, and their presence in the context of education looks back on a long tradition.

Keywords: theatrical activities; stage production; consensus through conversation; speaking in public

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Introduction

Today dramatic play and drama pedagogy are already known approaches in various fields of public education. In Hungary, the National Core Curriculum (Nemzeti Alaptanterv, NAT) even contains a subject called drama (though in very limited weekly hours and often only as an elective subject). Moreover, aspects of drama pedagogy are increasingly used as methodological tools in teaching other subjects. School field trips often involve playful activities in line with these approaches, and many other possibilities exist to let drama-based methodologies permeate public school institutions as long as there is a demand from educators and leaders of educational institutions. Within the possible uses of drama, school playacting is only one, but in this article, it is what I focus on and try to show the value of.

1. The presence of theatre in the history of education

The original meaning of the word drama is to do, to act. The central approach of drama and dramatic play to education finds some of its roots in the very beginnings

of European culture, in Ancient Greece and Rome. Out of all the ways theatre and drama can be connected to these cultures, here I only focus on those aspects where theatrical activity was designed to support educational goals.

In ancient Rome, where the Grecian school system became the foundation of education, children were taught in the “*ludus*.” This word can be translated as “pleasant activity, game,” and it is the Latin version of the Greek word “*scholé*,” where it had a similar meaning (Pukánszky-Németh 1996). It is not known for certain whether roleplaying activities were part of such playful, joyful games; however, the positive connotation of it is striking. Unfortunately, the modern concept of school only retains this original context in the roots of the modern word “school” – the idea that education and the space where it takes place ought to be joyful, pleasant, and diverting has been forgotten for several centuries. It is this playfulness that drama pedagogy places in the centre of its attention. It envisions a process where through in-role activities and learning within a community, the educational situation is an enjoyable one for both students and teachers. Katalin Gabnai, one of the leading figures of the introduction of drama pedagogy to Hungary, focuses on this aspect of joy when she defines drama pedagogy. To her, all educational activities that use tools of drama and create an atmosphere of collective joy can be grouped under the umbrella term of drama pedagogy. In addition, she highlights that this joy is equally important for participating children and educators since drama has always been a communal, social activity (Gabnai 2016).

This aspect of the community can be found in another crucial root of modern drama pedagogy, which is folk culture and its traditions. In all countries, traditional communal education was based on dramatic elements of traditions, role-playing games, masks, and dialogical chants. Consider dialogical folk stories or children’s games! The connection between the different fields is strong. According to Gabnai, theatre, education, and tradition are three concepts that cannot exist without people in a shared space (Gabnai 2005).

Mimetic forms were part of religious celebrations in the Middle Ages as well. For example, it was Saint Francis of Assisi, the Catholic friar and founder of the Franciscan order, the patron saint of animals and nature, who, with his followers, was the first to represent the birth of Jesus in the first known Nativity scene (Sipos 2016). Other Nativity representations, using puppets, sometimes had a string attached to the Virgin Mary so that she could be moved to nod or wave to the arriving shepherds. This can be regarded as an early form of marionette play (Szentirmai 1998). These forms of as-if-games and role-plays are also important foundations of modern theatre.

Equally important are the theatre traditions of ecclesiastic schools, which aimed to make learning more enjoyable and effective. While theatrical activities could be found in humanist education as well, the first conscious use of them as pedagogical tools can be linked to the Jesuit order in the sixteenth century. The idea was that creating a theatrical experience could make the most crucial Biblical stories more accessible and memorable for the people coming to the church. Therefore, the ecclesiastic schools formed around this time contained theatre education as part of their obligatory curriculum. The first school was founded in Messina in

1548. Later famous institutions followed in Cologne, Rome, Prague, and Vienna (Pukánszky-Németh 1996). In Hungarian-speaking areas of the time the first boarding school was founded in Nagyszombat (Trnava, today in Slovakia) in 1562; later others followed in Zagreb, Besztercebánya (Banská Bystrica), Selmecebánya (Banská Štiavnica), Trencsén (Trencín), Lőcse (Levoča), Kassa (Košice), Eperjes (Székely, 1986). In more southern regions, due to the Turkish occupation, it was only at the beginning of the seventeenth century that such schools were founded.

Theatrical performances could take many different forms: dialogue, declamatio (recitation), actiuncula (small scene), fabula in scena (story in a scene), drama or drama majus (big drama) are the most well-known ones among them. Next to religious, biblical, and mythological topics they also presented the lives of historical figures, among them some of the most famous Hungarian historical personages (Székely 1986). End-of-year events always included Latin language performances, and students of each year presented a different performance.

In the seventeenth century, out of all catholic and protestant schools, 147 already had student theatre. Aligned with the basic principles of the schools and the teacher's strict intentions and supervision, students learned and staged plays written by their teachers (Sipos 2016). In addition, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century catholic and protestant schools also relied on traditions of liturgical drama and mystery plays.

School theatre was incredibly popular for centuries, and many plays written for these occasions are still available today. The aim of these was learning, moral education, and enjoyment, but also to strengthen relationships with parents (e.g., Piarists, where originally theatrical performances were not allowed, but due to parental pressure, permission was granted) (Pukánszky-Németh 1996). The famous Csiksomlyó mystery plays began based on minorite dramatic traditions, and the first stage in the city of Pest was built by the Piarists in the 1720s (Székely 1986). It is also known, that there were short scenes of a more everyday atmosphere in the interludes between the acts. These interludes often included topics of student life: the characters were teachers and students, maybe parents (e.g., the grumpy mother). The story usually was about how the teacher accepts somebody as his pupil or how the stupid or misbehaving student is expelled from school (Varga 1990).

It is important to note that in protestant schools, the language of education was not Latin but the national language, which also meant that the language of theatrical performances was the national language as well. In Hungarian-speaking areas, the first protestant educational institutions where theatrical activities became important were those of the Unitarians, in Kolozsvár and Nagyvárad (Cluj-Napoca and Oradea in today's Romania).

The theatrical activities in these schools were popular because it was considered useful to let students learn through action and to use the experience to help retain information. It was proven that during the rehearsal process and the performances, the participating youths developed their skills of expression and confidence in play (Gabnai 2005).

It was in 1650 that the famous educator and pedagogical innovator Comenius came to Hungary to the Sárospatak Reformed College. He was invited by Zsuzsan-

na Lórántffy in order to help modernise and develop the college in Sárospatak into an innovative, high-quality institution for training priests. His views were seen as highly up-to-date at the time, and even today, many of his thoughts are still relevant. In his educational textbook called *Schola Ludus* (Playing school, or School as theatre), he helped students learn about professions, for example, by letting them roleplay practical situations. His goals were to help students learn through experience and language education. In his chapter titled “The role of games in education,” he talks about dramatic play and roleplay as central elements of education. In this chapter, he also mentions movement and games and the freedom of decision-making and communal activities (Mészáros-Németh-Pukánszky 2003). All of these key phrases are also fundamental ideas in modern drama-based pedagogy.

Learning through experience was also of prime importance to Rousseau, the key figure of the French revolution and classicism. He pointed out the importance of our senses in learning, calling them the first teachers (Pukánszky-Németh 1996). He was the first to highlight that the centre of education should be the child rather than the material to be learned. According to him, the educator’s task is to stand in the background in a guiding position; rather than a leader, the teacher ought to be a sort of facilitator, a helper. By giving students opportunities, he ought to create a link between students and the material instead of handing over knowledge.

One of Rousseau’s followers in Hungary was Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, a famous Hungarian poet. By the time Csokonai, a young, innovative teacher, began work in Debrecen and later Csurgó, the educational and developmental role of the theatre work happening in religious schools had already been a generally accepted tradition. In his work as an educator, he tried to live the ideas of the French thinker. He wrote plays with his students, and they performed them, which are continuations of the school drama traditions as well (Trencsényi 2003). It is anecdotal that during his short career as a teacher, Csokonai held his classes in nature, where in addition to free discussions, the students recited poetry, sang, and acted out scenes from the poet’s often very forward-thinking writings (Tajti 2011). The topics of these, based on the foreword from the author himself, were problems that interested the students and teachers (Trencsényi 2003).

The twentieth century saw the birth of the reform pedagogy movements (an expression that sums up the innovative pedagogical approaches born at the turn of the century). Their representatives aimed to improve and make education more effective based on developmental ideas. According to their principles, children are autonomous beings who possess the abilities they need to solve their tasks. Therefore, education and educators have to consider the child’s needs and abilities and adapt teaching goals accordingly (Pukánszky-Németh 1996). While these pedagogies have wildly differing specific curricula, many of them contain elements of improvisation and school acting.

To highlight only a few key thoughts that can also be connected to modern drama-based pedagogies, it is important to present certain ideas of art pedagogy. According to this approach, which aimed to improve children’s creativity, art is an important form of learning about the world and, thus, an important educational tool. Children practice self-expression through drawing, sketching, crafts, literary work,

music, movement, and theatre. According to these schools, especially the latter are ways of self-formation, self-knowledge, and knowing other people (Pukánszky-Németh 1996).

Similarly, Waldorf schools emphasise art education: dramatic play, recitation, and acting are all integral parts of school life, and children often write these together. They also create their own scenery and costumes (Pukánszky-Németh 1996). Another influential person in Western Europe's schools was Emile Dalcroze, who combined improvisation and rhythm to create his idea of "Rhythmic Gymnastics". His work was continued by Carl Orff, who focused mainly on experiences, play with instruments, communal music creation, and individual and chorus singing accompanied by instruments, which he all combined with movement and visual exercises (Pukánszky-Németh 1996). These approaches are crucial to consider as drama pedagogy aims to use all forms of art in a complex educational process (Eck 2020).

2. Theatre in today's schools

Generally, stage acting is not part of today's curricula. Some exceptions exist, for example, Waldorf schools, or schools connected to József Zsolnay, whose complex pedagogical program was later adapted to various skills development programs (NYIK, ÉKP, KÉK) to be used all over the country and which became an alternative curriculum in 1988. However, these examples are limited in number, and most schools only offer theatrical activities in the form of afternoon workshops or in specialised classes in art schools. The first National Core Curriculum included drama as a subject in 1995; however, in many cases, it is only an elective subject and is only obligatory for one or two years and a very limited number of hours per week. Moreover, its specific role and place in the curriculum have been subject to constant change.

This status quo ignores the incredibly high educational effects of theatre work as a creative group project as part of the educational process. On the one hand, they can be spaces for talent development; on the other, they can create an opportunity to help inclusion. For example, experience shows that students who are shy, have trouble fitting in, or might have speech difficulties or disabilities, very often fit into acting groups incredibly well. Another often ignored effect of such school performances is that among the ranks of the audience we can find not only current students of the school and their teachers but also parents or already graduated students of the school. Thus, these events become meeting places for students, teachers, and parents. This can help improve the relationship and communication between all users of the educational institution and create a better partner relationship between them.

3. Research on the role of acting in schools

As a research teacher, I too work along the above aims in my own school; therefore, I conducted studies in connection with the annual Class Theatre Festival. This is an event with an over twenty-year tradition, where students from years 9, 10, and 11 can take part. Each class from these three years can create a theatre performance of their own choice and perform during the one week in November dedicated to them. The work is entirely the product of the students themselves: choice of text (or the writing of their own script), the staging process, the direction, and the organisation. The visual world of the performance is also the product of student work and creativity. The complex learning processes students are involved in during the preparation and performance stages of this Festival inspired me to analyse it as an educational theatre project from the aspect of its aims and pedagogical efficiency.

According to my hypothesis, by analysing the effects and workings of the Festival, it is obvious that the theatrical activity has had a huge effect on personality development and community building, and played a role in creating a closer relationship with parents.

The qualitative research was conducted through data analysis based on written questionnaires. This was the best way to gather the most data. The answers included both closed and open-ended questions. We only processed those questions of the questionnaire through statistical data processing, which helped us prove or disprove our hypothesis. We coded answers to open-ended questions in order to make it possible to study the frequency of certain content elements in the answers. This coding was done by two researchers, separately from each other, and the coding results were compared for the most precise outcome. Answers received from these questionnaires also helped us get feedback on our question concerning the relationship with parents.

4. The Description of Research

4.1. Methodology

Our method was to present students who had participated in the festival with a written questionnaire. Data collection took place in December 2018, during the month following the Class Theatre Festival. The respondents included students from the years 9, 10, and 11. In 2018, the total number of these students was 202. Filling out the questionnaires was voluntary and anonymous and took place in a classroom environment, during a 45-minute class, using printed-out questionnaires. All in all, 164 questionnaires were filled out, which means that the participation was really high, namely, 81,2%. The number of participants in each year was roughly the same: out of all questionnaires, 29,2% were from year 10, and 35,4% each from years 9 and 11.

The questionnaire compiled by me included both closed and open-ended questions and contained 45 questions in total. Out of these, in this research summary, I use the most crucial ones with regard to my hypothesis.

- Class
- Did you participate in this year's performance?
 - What was your task?
 - Were you satisfied with your task?
 - Do you want similar tasks next year?
 - If not, what kind?
- Based on your judgement, have any of your skills or abilities improved during this preparation period?
 - Which?
- Has your relationship with your classmates changed during the rehearsal process or the performance?
 - How?
- What personal benefit did you get from the work you did?
- How did it benefit the whole class and the class atmosphere?
- Did you invite guests to the performance?
 - Who?
- How many performances did you see this year?

During the coding process, I created categories based on the content of the longer essay answers; then, I matched each answer with the relevant categories. One answer could be matched with one or more categories.

4.2. Analysis

When analysing the results, I used the IBM SPSS statistical program. The participating students did not necessarily answer all questions, which is why the total number of respondents to each question may vary.

The majority of respondents (86%) actively took part in the performance, and most of them (64,5%) had visible acting roles in the play. As a result, 88,5% of the respondents were satisfied with their tasks during the Festival, and 63,4% plan to fill similar roles the following year. Analysing the essay answers of those that were dissatisfied, it can be noted, that the vast majority wishes to play a bigger part in the creation process the following year – either more substantial roles or in case of those who had not taken part that year, they indicated they would wish to try it next time. Dissatisfaction was significantly higher among those respondents who had not been involved in the Festival. Of those respondents who had not participated, 63,6% were dissatisfied and 81,8% would like a different role next year. In contrast, out of those that took part in meaningful ways, 92,7% indicated that they were satisfied, and 68,3% plan to have similar tasks next year.

In terms of self-improvement, all in all, 74,8% thought that their skills and abilities improved during the Festival. Furthermore, as high as 95,8% considered their performance useful from their personal perspective.

Regarding personal relationships, 83,8% felt that their relationship with their classmates changed during the rehearsal process or the performance. Most commonly, they indicated the improvement and deepening of personal relationships. Many answers indicated that “I became friends with many people whom I hadn’t talked to that much before.” Only 5,1% mentioned that there was a deterioration of relationships due to conflict born during the rehearsal work. The majority (95,7%) thought the festival was beneficial to the class atmosphere. In addition, 61,4% of the answers indicated an improvement in group cohesion or a feeling of community.

Another crucial aspect was whom the students invited to their performances. 90,8% of the students invited somebody to the Festival. Almost everyone invited family (94,2%), and many of them invited family and friends alike (48,2%).

Student participation in the performances of other classes was also high. Almost half the students (44,3%) indicated that they had watched all performances of the Festival, and another 41,8% at least two-thirds of the performances.

It is important to note that when comparing the results of the three age groups, there was no discrepancy in participation numbers; however, younger students often tended toward non-acting tasks rather than visible acting roles. In terms of satisfaction or plans for different roles in the future, there was no difference in the three years. However, there was a significant difference between the years in terms of their thoughts on the development of skills and abilities. A bigger percentage of Year 10s thought that the Festival was beneficial to skills development, while Year 9s and 11s had roughly the same percentage.

There was no difference between the age groups in terms of whether they saw the personal usefulness of the Festival. However, it is important to note that the year-10 students primarily talked about the growth in confidence, while year-9 students primarily focused on strengthening the community with their classmates. There was no difference between the years in terms of whether their relationships have changed or the benefits they saw for the group. Similarly, the percentages in terms of guests invited or performances watched were the same for all years.

5. Conclusions, reflections

The first, particularly positive conclusion that can be drawn from these questionnaires was the personal involvement students seem to feel towards the Festival. Though the participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, out of all 202 students of the three years altogether 164 students took part. This participation ratio of 81,2% is very high, which shows that the students need to express themselves on this topic and feel the Festival is their own. In addition, since the ratio of participants is roughly the same in all three age groups, it can be said that there is no age-group-related difference between students in terms of how involved they are in the Festival.

Such a large number of active participants in the event itself also evidences this involvement. Based on our experiences of the more than past twenty years of this

Festival, we knew participation was always high. Nevertheless, the concrete data surprised even me, the organiser of the event. 141 students had an active part in the performances, which is 86% of all the respondents. However, even if we compare this number to the full number of students in the target years, and if we assume that all the students who chose not to fill out the questionnaire had not taken any part in the Festival (which by the way is unlikely), even then we get a 69,8% rate. Thus, roughly 70% of the target student population in fact participates in the Festival, which in my view, is a big success.

Another major success factor is student satisfaction: 88,5% of students were satisfied with the fulfilled tasks, and those who were not primarily felt dissatisfied because by the time of the questionnaire (in the month after the Festival) they already felt that they probably should have gotten more involved in the process, or if they had been involved, they should have taken on even more significant tasks. Interesting thoughts came up when comparing the three different age groups targeted by the study in terms of the tasks they had chosen for themselves. Namely, a larger percentage of the ninth-year students chose background helping tasks rather than acting ones. This might have one of two reasons: either a lack of acting confidence, which can develop over the years or, in the younger age group, a larger percentage of the entire class takes part in the project. Thus, more stage work is required of the participants.

The numbers are also high in terms of students' views on the benefits of the event. 95,8% thought the Festival had tangible personal benefits, and 74,8% thought there were improvements in their skills and abilities thanks to the project. The specific answers in terms of what these were varied widely. We organised them into 10 categories, but even so almost 20% of the responses could only be categorised as "other benefits." These responses wildly differed from each other and could not be grouped together with any other responses. Some of the skills mentioned here, for example, were "improvement about the tendency to procrastination," "helping others" and "handling technological tools." This large number of such very specific and individual benefits, in my view, shows that the Festival creates a complex learning environment with far more possible learning areas than may be specifically intended.

The most frequent personal improvement students highlighted was performance skills (48,8%). However, this phrasing is somewhat misleading since this skill set contains a variety of different areas and not necessarily purely acting-specific ones. A large variety of skills can be grouped under this heading that has a wide range of usage outside of acting in specific circumstances. For example, all language and rhetoric skills (clear articulation, clear delivery of lines, volume) can be listed here, but also improvements in movement, a more secure stage presence, or success in battling stage fright. This result shows that students get more confidence in participating in role-playing, which is also not an ability exclusive to the theatre world.

The second place (30%) in this category of personal improvement was some version of "joyful experiences" but expressed in a variety of different ways by respondents. This once again proves that acting and performing, experiencing excitement, nerves, and joy together is good, and shared success is a memory that lasts a

lifetime. Therefore, I believe that creating spaces where students get to live these experiences is an important pedagogical goal since such positive emotions strengthen the knowledge according to which work put into a project is not meaningless.

It was good to see (though also expected) that students included among their personal gain the strengthening of group cohesion, the strengthening of personal relationships, and the creation of new types of personal relationships. In addition, it is good that the answers clearly separate from this the joy of working together, giving it its own rightful place. Other frequent answers included the improvement of self-confidence and organisation skills. More surprising but positive results were that some answers recognised patience as a skill that can be gained as personal benefit, and also concentration.

One interesting detail is the discrepancy between the age groups in this category. It is the year-10 students that indicate most often that their abilities have improved. It might occur because their stage fright has subsided enough to let them focus more on skills development, and they have the maturity to recognise that they still have a lot to improve; thus, they consciously focus on making this improvement happen. This level of consciousness might improve their confidence as well.

The next group of questions specifically focused on the relationships with classmates. The primary response (49,2%) mentioned strengthening relationships (new friendships, deeper relationships). 34,7% highlighted improving the feeling of community, and 17% gave no explanation or examples just determined some kind of improvement. It has to be noted, however, that 5,1% talked about a deterioration of personal relationships, explaining it with new and strengthening conflicts. While this is luckily a very small number, it cannot be ignored from a pedagogical point of view.

The next group of questions shifts focus from the personal to the communal aspect of relationships, where answers such as joy over time spent together and the notion of mutual respect are particularly important responses and useful feedback for me. The fact that students of year 9 are the ones who experience the communal aspect of the festival most acutely is an almost natural by-product of this event: by being first-time participants and being thrown into the deep end.

One significant piece of data is the high percentage of students who had invited guests to the event. 90,8% of the students invited guests and also 95% invited their parents. This shows not only the importance this event has in the lives of the students, but also creates a unique opportunity for parents, teachers, and students to interact in new ways they otherwise might not have the chance for.

Another crucial piece of data that proves the educational nature of this project is that the students saw an average of 3,87 theatrical performances during the week of the Festival. Approximately half of the respondents saw all 5 performances created that year. These facts prove that the careful monitoring of a project of such a scale is indispensable, which is why a study such as this provided invaluable information.

As a closing word of this study, I would like to highlight one aspect of the questionnaires. The last question allowed students to formulate any thought they wished to convey (What do you find important to tell me in connection with the Festival?).

To my surprise, I found a large number of various responses here. This fact in itself is already very important as it shows that students have thoughts and opinions on the Festival, which they wish to convey. By analysing these and looking for common keywords, let me just highlight a few that can be found in many of them: gratitude, joy, experience, cosiness, and tradition.

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