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ECOLOGICAL EDUCATION OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN USING PROCESS DRAMA

Branka Bajić Jovanov

Introduction (subject and methodology)

In this paper, we analyse pedagogical and educational outcomes of using drama methods in ecological preschool education (children from four to six years old). We are particularly interested in why and how this kind of learning enables long-term knowledge.

This paper is based on a ten-year collaborative project between POD Theatre, the Municipality of Savski Venac, and the Preschool Institution Savski Venac in Belgrade, Serbia. Using case study analysis, we focus on three workshops from the project’s basic programme – Water, Air, and Recycling – for preschool children from ten Belgrade kindergartens.

Terminology

- **Process drama** is a genre within educational drama that focuses on collaborative investigation and problem-solving in an imaginary world (DICE, 2010).
- **Pretext** refers to the source or impulse of the drama process. It may be an object, a piece of music, a story, a location, or a character.
- **Collective role** – in process drama, the participants are framed into a collective role, as individual members of a group. They may, for instance, be servants at a castle, shopkeepers in a street, or expedition explorers.
- **Drama conventions** are indicators of the way in which *time*, *space*, and *presence* can interact and be imaginatively shaped to create different kinds of meaning in theatre (Neelands & Goode, 2000, p. 4).
- **Compound stimulus** – something that has the potential to interest participants to further examine it and create dramatic stories based on the inspiration they receive from it: objects, documents, phrases, audiovisual material, etc. *Compound* here means a set of several elements, and *stimulus* the urge to create or start a story.
- **Facilitator** is the one leading the process drama, “a mediator between the participant and the material under exploration” (DICE, 2010).
Ecological education using process drama

Milestones of participants’ learning process

Within the ecological process drama workshops, we can detect significant moments in a participant’s learning process which generate rich opportunities for learning, and define them as milestones.

The pretext

The first workshop (Water) begins as an exciting event: it is the first meeting of the children and two facilitators (they will meet once a week over the next three months, on expeditions to come), the latter in the role of adult explorers who seek the children’s help to go together on a major journey aimed to save planet Earth. In this way, children are immediately inspired to be protagonists and to fully participate in the event as young explorers.

So, from the beginning and throughout the whole programme, participants were framed into a collective role as young explorers who are going on expeditions to investigate and save the planet in danger, and in this way, children had the opportunity of influencing what and how something will happen. According to Heathcote (1984b), this is the most important factor, being framed into a position of influence.

The workshop Recycling begins with a facilitator in the role of explorer (and participants framed in the role of young explorers) who is reading newspaper headlines, created previously by the facilitators with text and appropriate images. The news serves as a pretext for the workshop’s main educational theme, which is Recycling:

- Five kilograms of unknown garbage was found in the river today with ten rats gathered around it.
- In the city, people dumped garbage in the front of their yard and set it on fire, which then stank throughout the day and night.
- Mrs. Anonymous threw an empty can of Coca-Cola into the Danube, which floated down the river and eventually reached the Black Sea, where a whale bit into it and lost five teeth. The unfortunate whale was left toothless and hungry.

The facilitator suggests that this Mrs. must be Granny Trash, since her behaviour is well known among the explorers of the world; she lives on Trash Mountain where she is collecting waste in a pile without realising how it is bad for nature and herself.

Set in this way, the pretext activates the children’s cognitive process; they start focusing on ecological terms, invoking what they already know and preparing for exciting and mysterious things that are about to be discovered.

The role of the facilitator

The strength of the pretext and of the whole workshop depends largely on facilitators. Therefore, it is very important for the facilitators to engage in detailed preparation and research beforehand.

Two facilitators were involved in each workshop. They had varied backgrounds — actors, musicians, teachers, dramaturgists, dancers — and they were highly skilled and experienced as teachers and performers. Additionally, they had to have an excellent understanding of ecological terminology; knowledge of the developmental stages of preschool children; skills in physical acting, mime, and improvisation; awareness of details, symbols, dramatic tension, language,
pauses, and voice; a good feel for where to place themselves with respect to the children, at what level, and how to use their eyes, gestures, and facial expressions; understanding of what questions to use; and the ability to maintain an open mind along the entire process.

**Acceptance of fiction**

Being set in a role with an inviting and adventurous pretext, the children from the beginning showed enthusiastic acceptance of fiction. Fictive elements set up at the beginning with a clear and inviting pretext and that are built up through the workshops create a safe environment for active learning. At the same time, children are aware the story is not real, but like in a children’s play, they act like it is real. Fiction makes it possible to face a problem directly, from a safe distance.

When the expedition sets off, the facilitators use an imaginary boat to travel. Also, when the group meet bad characters or characters in trouble, played by one of the facilitators changing their costume or physical appearance, even if some of the participants interrupt the fiction – oh, it’s not really Granny Trash, it’s you! – the process remains intact.

**Compound stimulus**

In the Air workshop, when the group enters the city of Smogville, an air-polluted city in the future, and investigates objects that are carefully set as a compound stimulus for analysis (a piece of mouldy bread that has been bitten into and dropped in a hurry, black flowers, the black sun and the black moon...), the facilitator finds a hidden letter, written by the king of all the birds – Peacock. Revealing the letter creates tension, and the children’s attention and focus are drawn to its content (before all the birds flew away, Peacock wrote the letter to the humans asking them to think about the impact of their actions since animals and humans are sharing the planet). Content and other stimulus open up the possibility for learning – cause and consequence. Every action in nature has a consequence. What happened here? How did human beings make the air so dirty that everybody left the city? We have to go back to our time and our city and think of how to change the situation before it’s too late!

**Conflict and tension**

During the project, we confirmed that the standard Aristotelian principles of classical theatre are very applicable in working with children, primarily the necessity of establishing a dramatic tension. In the workshops the conflict is set up at the start: it is the ecological problem that needs to be solved, and tension arises at moments when a new character is announced and appears, but also in segments where new scenography or new object is introduced that brings with it mystery and possibilities for investigation. In this way, the facilitators create an expectation of something to come. The tension prepares children for a grand finale, the moment when they will use their knowledge to solve the conflict. This is when they gather up all the information previously introduced to them, and now it needs to be used for change, for saving the planet.

**Stops and questions**

Many questions used in process drama are what we may call authentic questions – questions without a clear given answer. Such questions send a signal to the children that the facilitator is interested in their ideas and thoughts. During these three example workshops, stops were
planned in a workshops dramaturgy, but experienced facilitators were able to make stops in other moments where they decided it would be fruitful. For example, children get quite ecstatic when a bit funny character Granny Trash appears (workshop Recycling). This sometimes led to running into her and laughing at her, so the facilitator in this situation made a stop in order to remind the group of who she is and how careful we should be so we could change her. Carefully made stops and designed questions along the workshops encourage children’s participation and authentic answers and thinking.

**Culmination and catharsis**

At moments of culmination, the children’s involvement is at its peak: they are so close to the solution now. In the Water workshop, the culmination happens when the group, after travelling from the North Pole through the South Seas, wetlands, and forests, finally comes to a desert. The group is exhausted; maybe it was all pointless. The active participation of children in thinking through the problem, creatively and artistically overcoming obstacles and challenges, leads to a solution of the problem, to which the children contributed. As in ancient drama, everything harmonises, and the protagonists – the children – feel the satisfaction of merit because they personally contributed; they feel relief and emotional discharge, that is, what Aristotle called catharsis.

In Water, the drama convention ritual was used. The group was gathered to a “stylized enactment bound by traditional rules and codes, […] usually repetitious and requir[ing] individuals to submit to a group culture or ethic through their participation” (Neelands & Goode, 2000/1990, p. 101). The facilitator hears the water from the ground, so the whole group puts their ear to the ground; one facilitator knows the water’s language and translates what the water is saying (it will come back because it believes in children’s good hearts and pure intentions). Here, children were encouraged to think of what to say to the water – what we, as nature’s guardians, can do to keep the water clean and available for all.

**Evaluation and reflection**

The knowledge and information that will be important for the children through the workshops and expeditions is established from the outset. This knowledge is then tested, put in practice through the development of fiction. When a problem situation pops up, the children are encouraged to think about what was said at the beginning, which will help the group solve the problem and continue. Therefore, each workshop has a culmination followed by resolution of the problem, then an evaluation and a group reflection. At the end, the group is back at the kindergarten and seated in a circle, so that important points arising from the workshop could be shared. Fiction here is maintained, with the facilitators setting them a small task to do before they meet again a week later (such as to draw scenes from the expedition, or finish a recycled instrument, or be a detective and find out if anyone keeps running water while brushing their teeth). Every workshop ends with a secret greeting of the explorers.

**Conclusion**

In these workshops, children were involved intellectually, emotionally, and corporally (physically). In order to be able to get an oblivious character like Granny Trash to change, they needed to tell her about all of the things they experienced/learned on the previous journey (how the waste she is not recycling is affecting animals, plants, and humans, and how nature itself is
suffering); they had to act it out to Granny Trash in order for her to feel empathy and start to change. This kind of participation serves a pedagogical and didactic purpose, since the children’s understanding of ecological problems is significantly increased. Their children’s involvement is holistic; their memory of the experience will be long-lasting and is at an intellectual as well as emotional level. Workshops provide experiential and practical learning in a creative and playful way, and children gained a sense of the interconnectedness of all things in nature.

The methodological framework of the evaluation included three target groups—the direct participants: the children, parents, and kindergarten teachers—and had three instruments for evaluation: interviews with kindergarten teachers, questionnaires for parents, and reflective evaluations in the form of focus groups with participants. Project activities were monitored by the kindergarten’s ecologists and teachers once a month, with written evaluations at the end of every project cycle.

Formal interviews with kindergarten teachers were conducted once, at the end of the project cycle, in a semi-structured format with open-ended questions, and informal interviews were conducted frequently, before or after workshops, as well as during the project preparation time.

Questionnaires for parents were prepared at the end of the project cycles as well, and reflective evaluations with participants were part of every workshop, offering time to reflect at the end of the expeditions.

These evaluations yielded practical evidence that this kind of learning enables long-term knowledge. Evaluations show that the kindergarten teachers believed that process drama ecological workshops build self-confidence, creativity, awareness of ecological issues, and respect for others. Parents stated that children often mentioned characters and events from the workshops over a long period of time, even after the end of the project cycle.

It is important to underline the need for ongoing work. After the first three-month set of workshops, two more programme levels followed, which means that each group of children completed different levels of the programme over at least two years. Each workshop, but also each new programme level, builds on knowledge gained in the previous one, and through recapitulations with children, we concluded that they remember what they previously learned and are highly motivated for further active involvement.

The workshops offer an educational as well as an artistic journey. We define the participants’ learning process as also artistic because it has strong elements of creativity, critical thinking, and creation of authentic meaning which is shared and communicated with others.

Notes

1 “The ideal pre-text ‘rings up the curtain’ by framing the participants effectively and economically in a firm relationship to the potential action. It may hint at previous events and foreshadow future occurrences so that the participants develop expectations about the dramatic action. The pre-text will also determine the first moments of the action, establishing location, atmosphere, roles, and situations. It provides the arc from which it is possible to begin to infer the full circle of the action” (O’Neill, 1995, p. 22).

2 Wagner organised Heathcote’s questions into seven types: questions that seek information, questions that supply information, branching questions (which call for a group decision between alternative courses of action), questions that control the class, questions that establish mood and feeling, questions that establish belief, and questions that deepen insight (Wagner, 1999/1976).

References


