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“FREEZE!” – BUILDING REFLECTIVE AND ANALYTICAL SKILLS IN CHILDREN THROUGH DRAMA

Jennifer Wong

Introduction

During the one-week school break in March 2015, I worked with 16 children between the ages of 6 and 12 on a theatre-making programme in the spare room of a social service organisation in Singapore. The theatre-making programme was my PhD research project, examining how participation in drama could enable a positive sense of self-efficacy in children from low-income homes. The young participants were invited by a youth worker from the Rainbow Service Centre (a pseudonym given to the organisation to protect the children’s identity) to participate in the theatre-making programme, and consent was obtained from the young people as well as their caregivers according to research protocols.

On the third day of the theatre-making programme, the children were asked to create images of “play”. The children were tasked with creating the tableau without discussing with each other. When someone was ready with an idea, that person would step into the performance space and offer an image. The other children would then contribute to the collective image by adding to the tableau performed until they had collectively formed a picture and no one else wanted to join in anymore.

The boys created a tableau depicting how soccer, one of the children’s favourite sports, was played in the neighbourhood. The image, performed collectively but developed individually, showed 12-year-old Man executing a nasty tackle on eight-year-old Rut, who was, at best, two-thirds as tall as Man. Using the image as a starting point, the children were asked to improvise without discussing with each other; to perform what happened in the game in slow motion. When the children unfroze from the tableau, Man completed the tackle and kicked Rut’s leg, which made the young boy fall to the ground, grimacing in pain. Man gained control of the ball and ran along with all the older boys in the image. The younger boys in the improvised performance stood still and looked lost. At that point, I shouted, “Freeze!”, and all the performers froze while still in action.

At the end of the improvised performance, the children were invited to explain their story. Tin and Kha, two of the 12-year olds in the performance, explained enthusiastically that Man had “snatched the ball from Rut and then Rut fell down and then (all the older boys) ran after the ball (which was now with Man)”. The pair also added that all the older boys were in a different team from the younger ones.
This image and the subsequent improvised performance conformed to the dominant culture of the low-income neighbourhood. Throughout the theatre-making programme, it was observed that the bigger boys dominated over the smaller ones and rough play was a given. There were unspoken social rules that the children observed, which bred inequalities in the relationships they shared with each other and promoted a social hierarchy which subjected some of the children to lower statuses. The children, especially the younger ones who were often recipients of injustices in the politics of play, did not challenge or question if there was another way to be with each other or play together. It was almost a rite of growing up in the neighbourhood: the bigger children would dominate and bully the smaller ones, and the smaller ones would dominate and bully the ones who were even smaller. At this point in the theatre-making process, we paused to reflect and discuss what the children thought about the way play was enacted in their environment.

The theatre-making programme with the children was a case study research project examining how collaborative and improvisational drama processes might enable a sense of positive self-efficacy and agency in children from economically disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. The drama sessions, divided into two phases ending with a performance each, spanned over three months. Data were collected throughout the drama programme in the forms of interviews with the children and the community worker who oversaw the programme, the facilitator’s reflection journal, video recordings of the drama workshops, focus group discussions with the young people and audio recordings of debrief sessions between the facilitator and community worker after each drama workshop. At the end of the data analysis, several stories emerged from the research to explain the importance of theatre-making and performance for children from marginalised settings to the negotiation of their current and future identities, and to the building of capabilities in a safe and dialogical environment.

The vignette above is an example from one of the key findings showing how participation in drama can serve as a platform for participants to pause and reflect individually while engaging in a collective dialogical and analytical process to examine issues and events. Heathcote (2013) suggests that drama allows for the examination of a problem or situation by freezing it in time. The participants can undergo a process of change when given the opportunity to investigate and explore the various possibilities within the problem or situation. Kukla (1987) argues that participation in drama acts as a “balance between the freedom of the imagination and the constraints of the real world, and adds a new dimension to their thinking” (p. 76). O’Connor (2013) furthers this argument and explains that drama facilitates a process by which a participant can step in and out of the fiction and watch himself or herself be in situations that can be analysed through the safety of distance in fiction. At the same time, it facilitates the undertaking of a shared investigation into the roles created and performed both in the drama and also in reality (Prendergast & Saxton, 2013). The ability to pause an action during the drama to reflect and analyse it as it is happening is critical in enabling the thinking process.

This chapter argues that the reflective and dialogical space enabled through drama, specifically the ability to freeze an action as a situation or problem is being performed, is especially critical for young people who live in challenging environments, such as the ones who participated in the theatre-making programme. Besides being economically impoverished, these young people lacked adult supervision and guidance, as many of their parents were either working multiple jobs or in prisons or absent. The children struggled academically, and some of them were attending school on an ad hoc basis. The community playground was the place where these children spent most of their waking hours, and it was a challenging space where the young people negotiated social hierarchies and the politics of survival in their residential and social environments.
In the theatre-making programme, the children stopped frequently in the devising process to dialogue and debate about the stories that were performed. The engagement in individual and collective reflections as they collaboratively analysed the stories they were creating served as opportunities for the children to practise an important “thinking-through” process crucial to understanding and surviving in their challenging world.

**Being a child from the low-income community**

Before we delve into the discussion on the reflective and analytical space enabled through drama and theatre-making, it is necessary to be introduced to the young participants in the theatre-making programme and the various environments they lived and operated in. As mentioned earlier, the children were invited into the drama programme by the youth worker from the Rainbow Service Centre. The children and their caregivers understood that the programme was also the research work of a PhD student, and consent and assent were obtained according to ethics guidelines.

Since the theatre-making programme took place in 2015, it is therefore useful to briefly examine the economical, educational and social conditions confronting low-income citizens of Singapore in the few years leading to 2015. According to *The Straits Times*, the official newspaper of Singapore, there were about 105,000 households in Singapore with at least one working member in the family who lived with a combined family income of less than SGD1,500 a month (Chan & Basu, 2013). This amount accounted for less than half of the average monthly salary of a typical Singaporean, whose mean annual income was SGD65,000 (Basu, 2013).

According to the Department of Statistics, Singapore, in 2015, over 80% of Singapore’s citizens and permanent residents lived in flats built by the government, and 90% of those living in the government-built flats owned the apartments they lived in (https://www.singstat.gov.sg/find-data/search-by-theme/households/households/latest-data). The remaining 20% of Singapore’s citizens lived in private apartments or houses with land. Singaporeans received a variety of help from the government when they wished to purchase a government-built flat for their own stay, from once-off cash subsidies to lower mortgage interest rates. All citizens, married or unmarried, above the age of 35 were eligible for at least one type of financial assistance from the government to make their purchase. With the many financial schemes in place, it was easy for a Singaporean to be a homeowner, and also a source of national pride.

The 16 children in the theatre-making programme and their families were residents in a low-income subsidised rental estate. In Singapore, individuals with family incomes no more than SGD 1,500/month were eligible in 2015 to rent the government-subsidised flats which were approximately 32 square metres in size. A single person was not eligible to rent these flats; applicants must have a clear family nucleus, or be joined with another single person in the application (Housing and Development Board, 2015). There were several other stringent conditions to be met before an applicant could qualify to be a tenant. When an applicant met the strict requirements, it was quite clear that the individual and his/her family or partner came from the lower-income group. Many social service organisations had set up their offices in the government-subsidised rental flat neighbourhoods, or in close proximity, to facilitate offering their services to the residents. According to the youth worker from Rainbow Service Centre, many of the children in the theatre-making programme lived with more than six people across three generations in the small space. The children and their families were beneficiaries of financial, job placement and food assistance programmes from social service organisations.
In addition to being economically impoverished, the children also faced academic challenges. The literacy levels of the children across the age groups were low; only a small handful could speak fluently in English, which is the official language of the country, and most struggled to write. According to the youth worker, not all the children were attending school regularly. Rainbow Service Centre offered free tuition and learning support classes to the children in the low-income estate to help them with their academic work. The organisation also provided enrichment activities which the young people missed out on due to their socio-economic circumstances. These enrichment activities included guitar lessons, and soccer and dance programmes.

In Singapore, approximately SGD820 million is spent annually on private tuitions by parents who have the financial means to help their children attain better grades in school (Wong, 2012). Private tuition in Singapore is a lucrative business with over 500 tuition centres set up nation-wide and freelance tutors whose statistics were not captured by the Ministry of Manpower.

There have been concerns that the Singapore education system could become increasingly stratified (Ng, 2013). Loh (2011) explains that families who had the financial means were better able to support their children in their academic pursuits by engaging professional help such as tuition centres and private tutors. This additional help gave the children an important and highly unfair advantage in their studies over their financially disadvantaged peers. These same wealthier families were also likely to be able to afford to enrol their children in enrichment programmes that catered to character and cultural development.

In 2015, children and adolescents who were from lower-income families relied predominantly on the schools or social service agencies such as Rainbow Service Centre to cater to their academic and personal development. With the lower-income families earning an average of SGD 1,500 per month (Chan & Basu, 2013), not only were they struggling to cover the basic costs of living in Singapore for a family of four, but activities which would include them socially were also mostly out of their reach, as those activities required mean family incomes of SGD2,500–3,000 (Loh, 2011). Thus, the perpetuating of the chronically poor became even more realistic to those who were suffering from a lack of financial resources; they and their children struggled to break out of the poverty cycle because they were unable to afford better educational and personal development services to help propel them out of the low-income strata.

This brief introduction to the circumstances surrounding children and adults in the low-income community I worked in 2015 is intended to serve as the setting within which the young participants in the theatre-making programme performed, and the discussion of building reflective and analytical abilities in the young people through making and performing tableaux was held. The lack of adult guidance at home and the infrequent attendance in school, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, meant that the children did not have a support structure that was able to provide them with mature and responsible advice. The young people relied heavily on the social relationships they built in the community playground as references to how they should get along with other people and how they should behave in peer relationships.

The rest of this chapter discusses the performances of the children’s lived experiences in the theatre-making process, and how tableaux served to freeze significant moments in the children’s narratives and facilitated the reflection and analysis needed for them to make sense of what had happened. Through these critical pauses, the children were able to engage in dialogues about what they had experienced, what they thought about these experiences, and how they envisioned practical changes that could be made to improve the situations.
The theatre-making programme

The narratives generated in the theatre-making process with the 16 children revolved very much around events in the young people’s lives. The children made the decision to perform stories about themselves, as they proclaimed that they were disinterested in telling stories about “other people”. The theatre-making process chosen by these children resonated with Oddey’s (1994) argument that the storying and performance-making journey is a way for the participants to gain and construct understanding and meaning of themselves about their lived experiences, and that the devising process “can start from an infinite number of possibilities, such as an idea, image, concept, poem, piece of music, or painting, and the precise nature of the end product is unknown” (Oddey, 1994, p. 7).

The children had low oral and written literacy levels in English, so performing their stories in tableaux became a means of communication between the young participants and me. The children performed their stories mostly through images, and short discussions ensued in very simple English to deepen the understanding of what was performed. Sometimes, the tableaux created were extended into short performances, presented either in slow motion or in a series of images to build context and further the storying.

The children were given prompts showing what they did in school, at home and on the communal playground in the residential estate as stimuli for the performance creation process. These were three environments where the young people spent most parts of their days and which held significance to them of varying degrees. The resulting tableaux created in response to the three environments showed images of violence and bullying at the playground, children doing nothing else but sleeping when they were at home, and, finally, images of being punished in school. The children performed these images as ways to explain their daily experiences, and the discussions after the performances showed the young people to be accepting that the negative events in their social environments were unavoidable and that they were powerless individuals who could not effect change.

The children unanimously decided that they wanted to perform stories about the events at the playground because it was the space where they spent the majority of their time, and it was also the place where the social hierarchy and play politics were most prominently enacted. At the same time, the playground was the singular space in which the children were most interested and invested during the exploration of the narratives. The theatre-making programme therefore became a tool to facilitate the process for the children to “question, imagine and innovate” (Saxton & Miller, 2013, p. 112) the common rhetoric of the playground. The images created and performed by the children and the subsequent reflections and discussions became means to dislocate the children from their acceptance of bullying and violence as inevitable at the playground, and enabled a dialogical process of rethinking what could be done differently.

The creation of tableaux to show how the children played in the playground resulted in multiple images of bullying and violence. These were the same images that the children were excited to include in their final performance for an invited audience of families and friends at the end of the week. Ewing (2013) explains that storytellers shape their narratives according to the audience present. The tableau and subsequent performance described in the introduction of this chapter conformed to the common rhetoric of the community at play: the older boys dominated the play and the younger children had to defer to the existing social hegemony.

When the children who were not in the tableau watched how the younger boys were treated unfairly and brusquely in the game of friendly soccer, they protested and wanted...
to “make things fair”. In response to the tableau and performance, the girls argued that changes needed to be made to the narrative. The girls in the audience felt indignant that the older boys were not engaging in fair play but instead were marginalising the young ones. To demonstrate what the girls meant by playing together, nine-year-old Ash stood up and started to pull some of the boys, grouping them together. Ash moved quickly and seemed to be assessing their builds as she shifted them physically around. She looked at me after she had grouped them and said, “Teacher, like that. Some tall, some short in one team. So all have tall and short, equal. Like that, is fair”. She had grouped children of different ages and heights together regardless of their loyalty to specific cliques or who liked whom. The older boys let out a loud protest that they did not want the young ones in their teams because the younger ones could not play as well, but nine-year-old Fin retorted, “Then teach la (colloquial form of expression)! Teach them, then they know! Last time you small, you can play everything?”

The debate that ensued was powerful, as it was an opportunity for the theatre-making community to discuss the play politics at the communal space. While the children argued and fought when they had previously encountered injustice during play at the playground, they did not have the space to dialogue and reflect about the inequality and bullying that they recognised as inevitable in their daily living. It was also critical that the theatre-making community heard the suggestion of playing together from their peers and not from me, that they reflected and analysed events that affected them and how they would like to respond or make changes themselves. Tarlington and Michaels (1995) explain that participants in theatre-making engage in exploration of their own attitudes and those held by others, and this, in turn, leads to “new understandings regarding human behavior” (p. 11). I see resonance in Tarlington and Michael’s theory with what was happening in the theatre-making session that afternoon – the girls were empathetic towards the younger boys and deemed the behaviours of the older boys objectionable. The girls saw the marginalisation of the younger children as an act they would not condone, and therefore they insisted there was a need for acceptance and inclusion in the play politics of the community. The empathy from the girls signified an acknowledgement that there was a need to embrace difference instead of using it as a means to be divisive.

I asked if that suggestion to regroup the members in each team was something the older boys would consider. Most of them looked at the floor, and some started to murmur inaudibly. Sha, aged 12, broke the awkwardness of the situation and exclaimed loudly, “Ok la, can la can la!” The boys were challenged to show us another collective image of playing soccer together and asked how they would change the way they played. Sha and Tin worked quickly and started issuing orders at everyone to take their positions. The result was a picture of Sha teaching six-year-old Ni how to kick a ball while the rest of the boys looked on. Bruun (2017) and Heikkinen (2016) conclude that the opportunity to play different roles through a dramatic process creates a platform for participants to practise empathy and reciprocity that may be otherwise missing in their lives. While the newly created tableau might not be evidence that the play politics will change for the children when they leave the theatre-making space, it did, however, provide a means for the children to visualise the possibility of playing together as long as the older boys were willing to exercise patience and kindness towards the younger ones. The girls were visibly proud that their suggestions were taken seriously, and a new image was created. Pris, aged 12, responded proudly, “See! Can what (colloquial expression)! Can play together what!”

The process of creating fiction in the theatre-making programme provided the young people with opportunities to adopt critical and reflective lenses to consider and re-evaluate the ways they were behaving and the social relationships they were building. Throughout
the theatre-making programme, the children were eager and insistent on performing honest renditions of the playground events. They had originally chosen to include stories of bullying and peer conflicts in the performance that culminated after five days of making theatre together; however, they also became conscious that they were reinforcing negative behaviours and events in their performance. The final narrative that was performed to a room of about 50 audience members, consisting of families and neighbours, was a collage of the lived experiences of the children that was injected with images of hope and the practical changes they wished to see in the same environments.

The reflective and analytical space

Prendergast and Saxton (2013) suggest that “tableaux work is very safe work for generally unskilled participants, as it only requires holding still, although there is a significant challenge in this in regard to physicality and concentration” (p. 110). When the children in the theatre-making programme created tableaux from their lived experiences to build the performance, they entered the theatre-making process as individuals who had not previously encountered drama work. However, their lack of experience or training in drama work did not prevent them from creating and performing compelling images with raw and intense emotions that refracted stories from their lives.

The “holding still”, as Prendergast and Saxton had noted above, presented opportunities for the children in the theatre-making programme to re-present those issues and situations they felt strongly about, either as themselves or as others who were involved in those narratives.

As mentioned earlier, the children in the theatre-making programme had low levels of spoken English, and we struggled to find a common language between us that was comfortable for all parties. Telling their stories through images therefore became a convenient way of exploring their lived experiences.

The children took on the roles of various characters in their stories, held very still and froze to present authentic performances of these difficult events in their lives. The children understood that they had to be very committed to the performances in the images or the tensions in the stories would be lost, and the audience would not be able to understand or appreciate what they were trying to say. Their desire to show their lived experiences and make connections with the audience resulted in a heightened level of commitment to their performances.

The brief period of time when the children were “holding still” held poignant and intense potential for the young people to reflect upon and reconsider what had happened, and the ensuing activities that stemmed from the performance of the tableaux were ways to enter dialogical and analytical explorations of those lived experiences. As the young people froze in action, time stopped for them at marked moments of the performed stories and provided the space for thinking, seeing and feeling. The making and the performing of tableaux therefore were means for participants to break up the narratives they wished to investigate and to find new ways to re-look and re-understand in order to reflect and analyse in a controlled method (Prendergast & Saxton, 2013; Thompson, 2003). Peter (2009), citing evidence from neuroscience research, explains that participation in drama processes “with memorable learning contexts (are) more likely to be favourably edited and etched on the brain” (p. 10).

In the theatre-making programme, the young participants took on different roles in the tableaux to delve into the situations and challenges of the characters in the stories. The embodied and oftentimes empathetic learning and performance of the characters opened the
space for the participants to perform from the perspectives of the roles they had adopted. The reflective and analytical space opened up through drama became opportunities for the participants to practise empathy and reciprocity in relationships that may be missing in real life (Bruun, 2017; Heikkinen, 2016).

In addition, Hickey-Moody (2015) notes that the making of performance for an audience is a way theatre-makers question, acquiesce or encourage their audience to question or acquiesce in applied theatre programmes. In a similar way, the children in the theatre-making programme were questioning, challenging and making sense of the feelings and situations they had encountered in their lives, and engaging their audience in a dialogical and reflective process to collaboratively and collectively make meaning of those feelings and situations presented through the tableaux. The image that is performed in “silence and stillness…presents participants with a paradoxical challenge that gently pushes them to find imagistic ways to say what they want to say” (Prendergast & Saxton, 2013, p. 107). The “imagistic way” of telling their stories gave rise to multiple ways of interpretation, understanding and perspectives for both the performers and the audience who viewed these images. The conversations that resulted from these multiple ways of looking at the images presented became fertile stimuli for generating further reflections and analyses to deepen understanding.

Bruun (2017) and Taylor (1998) both claim that participation in drama builds skills in the participants that could be transferred from make-believe contexts into reality. When participating in drama, young people are provided with the opportunities to explore alternative perspectives and ways of being through practices in reflection and imagination (Cahill, 2010). When they engaged in theatre-making processes, the young participants in the theatre-making programme played out different possibilities and outcomes to the various situations they encountered daily, and that formed a cyclical relationship with reflection and imagination. Bruun (2017) further suggests that the reflective and imaginative skills employed in drama are transferable to the real lives of the participants and, as such, can have significant impacts on their sense of self-efficacy and agency. Hughes and Ruding (2013) suggest that participation in drama builds the “ability to respond flexibly and fluidly” (p. 222), two essential skills the children in this study require to survive in their tough neighbourhood and to navigate the social hierarchy present. The children’s reflections and dialogues about the unfair play methods and the subsequent performance of new play methods were examples of this symbolic connection.

However, it is important to highlight at this juncture that the reflective and analytical process in theatre-making requires a skilful facilitator to be able to gently push the participants into probing and thinking deeply. The facilitator needs to see opportunities within the performance of the tableaux to ask the performers questions that will challenge their inherent beliefs regarding what is happening in the images presented. The facilitator also needs to have the sensitivities to read particular facial expressions, body behaviours and tensions in the tableaux, in order to dig deeper by asking questions with genuine curiosity. While it is not the purpose of this chapter to discuss the role and skills of the facilitator in a theatre-making or applied theatre programme, it needs to be made explicit that the reflective and analytical platform enabled through tableaux-making and performing requires a skilful and sensitive facilitator to journey with the participants.

Conclusion

In the theatre-making programme, the children involved engaged in an intense process to tell stories and create performances from narratives refracted from their lived experiences. These children, who lived in economically impoverished conditions, were confronted by

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challenges in familial, academic and social spheres. They conceded that the many different negative events in their lives were “normal” and expected, and the young people saw no other way of living and being in these situations.

The image-making and performing process in the drama programme provided the moments of “holding still” that were necessary for the children – they held still in the different narratives they were performing and were made to consider and reconsider what was happening. The audience was also given the opportunity in the stillness to challenge and question, to suggest and think about the stories that were being performed and their implications. The resulting platform created by the performance to reflect and analyse was important, as it made the children aware that the status quo might not be something they simply had to endure, and, at the same time, it provided a space for experimenting with practical ways to make small changes to the ways they were living and being with each other. Landy and Montgomery (2012) remind us that “At the heart of the experience of Applied Theatre is a simple idea – this is a theatre for change that exists to question and challenge the given order” (Landy & Montgomery, 2012, p. 130).

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