

Conceptual Article

## Heightening the Fruition of Learning Disabled Children By Means of Theatre Education

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### **ABSTRACT**

In schools, teachers come across pupils who have diverse abilities and special needs. Some of the learners achieve high and some may lag behind in their learning. They may face learning problems such as difficulties in listening, speaking, thinking, reading, writing, spelling, reasoning, calculating or social skills. It is a great challenge on the part of teachers and trained educational specialists to deal with those children with learning disorders through the adoption of different educational strategies. In the current scenario, theatre education has emerged as an innovative strategy to mitigate the gap between educators and the educated. Theatre education is beginning to be seen as a unique hybrid of performance and child-centred learning. This educational medium initially aims to acquaint teachers with the concepts of learning and using the experiential method in teaching. This kind of synergy uniting classroom instruction and theatrical tools provides for students educational environment in its most effective way as it is both visual and auditory in a sophisticated fashion. Theatre education has been designed in many institutions across the globe to broaden the base of knowledge, hone skills, facilitate age-specific learning etc. Many theatrical companies today specialize in performances designed to cater to the needs of children with learning disabilities. It is seen that four components go into the success of this programme - thorough familiarity with the system of education, the use of experiential gains, openness to innovative ideas and presence of experts from the world of theatre. So theatre education seeks to create a wide range of learning opportunities across the whole curriculum in an inclusive setting.

**Keywords:** Learning disabilities, theatre education, creative arts, expressive learning, special needs education

## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

## LEARNING-DISABLED CHILDREN

The study of learning disability or specific learning dysfunction is one of the most controversial, dynamic and significant areas in special education. The field of learning disabilities is distinctly multidisciplinary, a fact which has influenced the controversy surrounding every aspect of the field, from defining the learning-disabled to planning intervention strategies (Smith et al, 1983). Learning disability is a problem in which individuals find it difficult to perform well in academics in spite of having average or above average intelligence. The learning disabilities which impact an individual's ability to learn are dyslexia (difficulty in reading and spelling), dysgraphia (difficulty in writing), dyscalculia (difficulty with mathematical calculations), dyspraxia (difficulty with acquisition of patterns of movement), dysphasia (difficulty in speaking and understanding) and so on.

The learning-disabled are those who function at high intellectual level, but who have a specific academic deficit coupled with an executive processing deficit. Such deficits often involve memory and perception, resulting in weaknesses in reading, writing or mathematics (Biswas, 2002). Often schoolteachers may come across such children who face difficulty in

learning the school subjects. Such children with special educational needs can be found in various schools. They may face difficulties in acquiring academic skills such as reading, spelling, writing, speaking, understanding, listening, thinking or arithmetic.

The symptoms of learning-disabled students manifest in one or more of the areas such as reading comprehension, spelling, written language, auditory processing, mathematical computation and problem solving skills. They may also experience difficulty in organizational, time management and social skills. Learning-disabled students may be slow readers and writers, have poor handwriting, have difficulty in copying materials, have frequent misspellings and grammatical errors, have difficulty in paying attention in class, have difficulty in recalling sequence of operations etc (<http://www.tntech.edu/disability>). A learning disability is found across all ages and in all socio- economic classes. Learning disabilities may affect individuals differently at different stages of life early childhood, elementary school years, adolescence and adulthood.

### **LEARNING DISABILITY -TYPES**

There are different kinds of learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dysphasia, dyspraxia and so on.

#### **Dyslexia**

Dyslexia is a learning disability that causes difficulty in reading and spelling, but does not affect intelligence. It refers to difficulty with words spelt, words pronounced, words written and association of meanings with words (Pollock & Waller, 1997). The symptoms of dyslexia include slow or inaccurate reading, poor spelling, poor writing or mixing up similar words. Dyslexic children may also have difficulty in recognizing words or letters, in associating sounds with letters or in making a word out of a combination of letters. The other symptoms of dyslexia include slow rate of oral and silent reading, excessive lip movement in silent reading, reading word by word, omission of letters / words while reading, substitution of letters / words while reading, inability to read for a longer time, difficulty in spelling words correctly, difficulty in pronunciation of words, difficulty in memorizing etc.

#### **Dysgraphia**

Dysgraphia is a learning disability that causes difficulty in writing. It is a learning disorder marked by special difficulties in learning to write, chiefly in forming sequences of letters into words and sentences (Vashistha & Bharadwaj, 2006). The symptoms of

dysgraphia include mixture of upper and lower case letters, irregular letter sizes and shapes, pain while writing, talking while writing etc. Moreover spelling mistakes, punctuation errors, irregular letter sizes and shapes, slowness in writing and copying, poor handwriting etc are the various symptoms found in dysgraphic students.

### **Dyscalculia**

Dyscalculia is a broad term that refers to severe difficulties in mathematics. In other words it is a wide range of life-long learning disabilities involving mathematics (Kumar & Raja, 2008). It is a mathematics disability in which pupils have a difficult time in solving arithmetic problems and grasping mathematical concepts. Dyscalculia can cause difficulties in learning mathematical concepts, memorizing mathematics facts, organizing numbers, and understanding how problems are organized on the page. Children with dyscalculia suffer from various learning problems such as inability in differentiating between sizes, shapes and quantities, inability to do counting, difficulty with fundamental operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, difficulty in telling time, difficulty with problem solving skills etc.

### **Dysphasia**

Dysphasia is a learning disability that causes difficulty in speaking and understanding. It can be described as a disturbed function in the process of interpreting and expressing language. It is a language disorder which indicates loss of language due to brain damage or dysfunction (Reddy et al, 2008). The symptoms of dysphasia include inability to comprehend language, inability to pronounce, inability to name objects, poor enunciation, excessive creation and use of personal neologisms, inability to repeat a phrase, persistent repetition of phrases, inability to speak in a grammatically correct fashion, alterations in inflexion, stress, and rhythm, incomplete sentences and soon.

### **Dyspraxia**

Dyspraxia is a learning disability that causes difficulty with patterns of movement. It can affect hand or eye coordination, especially handwriting and organization (Pollock & Waller, 1997). The symptoms of dyspraxia include difficulties in learning basic movement patterns, inability in establishing the correct pencil grip, difficulty in developing a desired writing speed, hand aching while writing, poor balance, difficulty combining movements into a controlled sequence, difficulty in remembering the next movement in a sequence, problems

with spatial awareness, trouble in picking up and holding onto simple objects due to poor muscle tone.

### **THEATRE EDUCATION**

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

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

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

Theatre education provides a conducive learning environment to the pupils in its most effective way as it is both visual and auditory in a sophisticated fashion. It integrates educational technology in the teaching and learning processes through the use of a variety of techniques to enhance teaching and learning. It helps the students to engage themselves in meaningful learning experiences. It considers individual differences and provides opportunities to all individuals to learn and contribute to their potential (<http://www3.ashland.edu/services/cardev/documents/Theatre%20Education%20K-12org.pdf>).

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

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

Theatre education greatly helps to improve academic performance. Drama activities improve reading comprehension and both verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Students who participate in drama often experience improved reading comprehension, maintain better attendance records and stay generally more engaged in school than their peers who do not experience the arts. Also it was studied that students who took courses in drama study or appreciation scored, on average, 55 points higher on verbal component and 26 points higher on

math component than their non-arts classmates(<http://www.aate.com/content.asp?pl=23&sl=69&contentid=69>).

Dramatic activities are now perceived as having several distinct functions in the classroom. The primary focus is on the use of creative drama and improvisation to aid in the child's mental, physical and emotional development. Theatrical devices are often used in the classroom to teach academic subjects such as history. Professional theatre companies tour to schools presenting plays which may be on the reading curriculum or which may be used to promote discussion on social or health issues. In secondary schools, plays are still presented with the educational intents of teaching language skills, fostering self-confidence, and developing a knowledge and appreciation of drama and theatre (<http://www.the-canadian-encyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=AIARTA0007946>).

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

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

A study which examined why students chose to attend the specialized visual and performing arts high school in central Florida through in depth interviews with two currently enrolled students and their parents revealed that quality of the experiences in schools helped

students to determine a career path and that the students saw themselves involved in theatre as professionals or as patrons (Wuertz, 2003). Jackson (2004) on investigating about variables that promote and/or inhibit theatre programme development in public schools studied that there were six variables that inhibit theatre programme development and that there were twenty variables that promote theatre programme development.

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

### **THEATRE EDUCATION AND LEARNING DISABLED CHILDREN**

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

Research indicates that drama courses and performance have a particularly positive effect on students with learning disabilities. The arts including drama by catering to different styles of learning engages students to actively learn, who might not otherwise take significant interest in academics. Drama activities can improve and help to maintain social and language skills of students with learning disabilities. In addition to building social and communication skills, involvement in drama courses and performance has been shown to improve students' self-esteem as well as their confidence in their academic activities (<http://www.aate.com/Icontent.asp?pl=23&sl=69&contentid=69>).

A study conducted by Kaliski (1978) on theatre workshop for children with learning disabilities discusses the benefits of the workshop including improved oral and written language, self-esteem and self-control. A study done on the impact of drama on children with special needs describes two drama programmes designed for children with specific learning

disabilities and based on the needs of these children to achieve and develop a positive self-image (Clopton & Davis, 1979).

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

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

Theatre education is considered by many individuals with learning disabilities to be a welcoming and friendly environment. Almost all of the events and activities run by theatre resource are accessible to those with mild or moderate learning disabilities. Such activities usually include activities with strong visual images and actions. The theatre resource with JCT workshop has a range of software applications including symbol writing systems which may help to improve the performance of the learning-disabled children. Exhibitions and facilitated visits are also arranged for these children which may greatly benefit them(<http://www.theatre-resource.org.uk/index.php?pid=461>). Theatre education may be able to help learning-disabled children by arranging facilitation/ personal assistance.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

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

mild or moderate learning disabilities or those with multiple learning disabilities could enhance their performance in academics through theatrical methods of learning.

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

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

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

## CONCLUSION

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

learning. By these specialized approaches to teaching, most educationally challenged learners can be helped to learn normally. It is therefore imperative for such learners to receive the highest quality of education possible.

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