



THE ROLE OF PERFORMING ARTS IN FURTHERING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA¹

Probing the subject of the role of performing arts in furthering the rights of children in South Africa requires us to look at performing arts and child development, the benefits of performing arts to children and the reasons why performing arts are often overlooked. It also requires us to look at the challenges we face in making performing arts education a priority in the South African education system. Finally, it suggests how performing arts can be brought to the fore by government and be prioritised in policy.

Performing Arts and Development

Performing Arts should be understood as a fundamental right for children. Performing arts gives children the ability to learn, play, and participate. This is entrenched in children's right to participate. The furtherance of the right to participation through performing arts cannot be gainsaid. When children perform they are given a voice and they are guaranteed an audience. Child participation demands a certain level of articulation, what is important is how performing arts help children garner confidence and verbal skills thus enabling them to be eloquent in articulating issues of concern. This represents an element of civic engagement. By no means are performing arts a solution to all of society's problems but when children perform they make society aware of the pertinent issues plaguing them or their colleagues. Thus it is crucial for children to be exposed to performing arts in the formative years.

Prior to examining how performance arts furthers the rights of children it is essential to look at its significance in the developmental stages of a child. As nutrition and education play an important part in a child's development, so does performing arts and more so when it is combined with education. So it is important to realise that performing arts education is not merely about creating future artists but enabling an academic achievement together with social and emotional development. This guarantees a holistic approach to the development and ambition of every child.

Children learn by mimicking or imitating life. They are experimental in their approach to life. They learn by first observing and moving their limbs and interacting with the world around them through their senses. They explore the environment through seeing, smelling, touching and tasting. In the field of performing arts, exercising your senses is very crucial to an artist's development of his or her craft. For example, a sense of smell can evoke memories of your childhood even in your adulthood. The first signs of the importance of performing arts are evident in these early stages of the child's development.

¹ This opinion piece was written for PAN: Children by Lulama Masimini, Gauteng Co-ordinator of ASSITEJ (International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People)

So it is important to note and weave that into the child's learning phases at school. Role playing, an effective learning method is severed from learning methods used in school and that makes children learn only in a didactic cognitive way.

Didactic cognitive learning neglects the naturally intuitive way of learning by imitating and role playing. It takes over the instinctive participative way of learning. This does not fully take into account children's right to participate. Without the intervention of arts education children only develop the left side of the brain which is responsible for literal thinking and cognitive thinking. The right side of the brain is responsible for creative and intuitive thinking. Also, it is very important in a child's development but is often neglected. The combination and the use of both sides of the brain bring balance to a child's development.

The benefits of Performing Arts to children

There are many benefits in experiencing live theatre for a child. It contributes to a child's development emotionally, intellectually and psychologically. It has even been stated as a requirement of the New Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) which replaced the Out Comes Based Education (OBE) that creative arts be part of compulsory subjects (see CAPS Curriculum) and that every school must see at least one theatre production a year (Assitej Catalogue 2014).

A live performance is a very special interaction between the actors and the audience and its immediacy can transform a person's perspective. Hence it is important to expose to and involve our children in good live performances that are designed for and by them.

Performing arts connect children to themselves and others. They also connect children with the world and the issues around them. Performance arts makes it easy for children to articulate their concerns with society by expressing them through their performances. In learning situations performance arts reach learners who are not normally reachable through other subjects. Research shows that learners who have exposure to arts do better in other subjects including science and maths, more so in arts-connected subjects like languages and humanities. (MacArthur Foundation's "The champion of change: the impact of the arts on learning).

Performance arts deepen the capacity of empathy among children and it also enhances emotional intelligence. For example music and singing allows children to easily access emotions. Songs express different emotions and children are able to explore all emotions without feelings of shame or fear. Music also exposes cultural diversity which allows a child to explore perceptions different from their own. The arts help develop an appreciation of one's own cultural heritage as well as other cultures. Performing arts help build an appreciation for cultural diversity therefore leading to social cohesion. Art forms such as dancing can also enhance a child's self-esteem. To be able to create movement and rhythm alongside music can be a phenomenal achievement for a child. Also, the ability to stand in front of others and allow oneself to explore through your body and voice is an empowering moment for a child.

Performing arts is an ideal teacher in the development of a human being from early childhood. If we ensure that everyone has access to performing arts from early childhood we would have contributed to ensuring that children learn how to learn sooner in life. That would open them to learning anew and creatively throughout life as they grow older, for example, acting and drama improves intelligence and communication skills. Scriptwriting and researching a play and the characters improve a child's ability to collect, keep, analyse and interpret information as well as improve memory. Drama orientated children do better when standing up and presenting their case in any subject or situation in class or in life.

Improvisation classes improve imagination, problem solving and self-expression. Drama can also help children overcome anxieties. The triumph of going out on stage for a child can be equivalent to winning a class medal for academic achievement or sports medallion. Social interaction and team work is mostly practised in drama and is usually coupled with individual talent. The combination of the two will be beneficial to the child in the long term.

Reasons Why Performing arts are often overlooked

Performing arts have often been used as a way to conscientise the public. In the past this was almost impossible as performance artists were banned or censored from fully expressing themselves. That has led to the performing arts not being a supported tool of education by the state. Performing arts have always been looked at as a hobby or an extra curricula activity. This has led to a major downfall and misrepresentation of this art form as well as, the deprivation of art to children. At school, art is chosen as a last option. Most educators in South Africa have not experienced arts education in their own academic development and as a result place no value on performing arts as a priority in their schools.

Challenges

Numerous challenges have been stated above which include the lack of higher education institutions that train arts educators to make arts education a priority at school. The lack of proper facilities such as space and resources at schools and our communities, inexperienced arts educators and lack of political will add to these challenges. It should not be left to schools alone to deal with arts education and development of children. The community must also take responsibility. We should build “communiversities” for performing arts in our communities for children after school especially to cater for those who do not get exposed to performance arts at their schools.

How Performing Arts can be brought to the fore and prioritised in education policy

Various organisations are working towards the initiative of prioritising arts education in our schools and among the youth. Policy makers can benefit from looking at the methods employed by non-state actors in ensuring that performing arts are prioritised. ASSITEJ SA (International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People) makes a concerted and united effort with all stakeholders including the government to reach every child and young person in the country with high quality arts experiences especially designed for them. ASSITEJ has partnered with organisations like Rand Merchant Bank (RMB), The National Theatre of London, Handspring Theatre Company as well as the Department of Education to bring the story of “War Horse”, a production about the history of World War One told through the eyes of a horse, to school children.

As is policy that performing arts should be compulsory at school, government could further fast track the implementation process by ensuring that educators are trained and provided with arts facilities. ASSITEJ assists with this process by running Theatre4Youth workshops which bring artists together in a national system to work together to ensure access to quality arts education through a series of workshops. These workshops are linked to the curriculum and are suited for both educators and children. ASSITEJ’s goal is to reach every child in South Africa through performing arts. If policy makers employed these methods, children’s rights and learning experiences can be enhanced.

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