A new strategy for Sri Lankan drama education

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ABSTRACT
The teaching of drama in Sri Lanka is presently only conducted by the traditional lecture method, which is not conducive to preparing students for the modern globalised world. To ascertain whether teaching by process drama techniques improved creativity in secondary school students, a non-randomised control group design with an intervention group, a control group and an active control group, was conducted. This article describes the perceptions of teachers in the intervention group who taught process drama. We describe the obstacles which the teachers experienced when teaching process drama and the challenge to bring changes to drama education in Sri Lanka.

KEYWORDS
Sri Lanka; process drama; new strategy

Although the benefits of teaching drama by process drama techniques have been accepted for some time (see for example Anderson 2016; Bowell and Heap 2017), and have been implemented in many parts of the world (Hulse and Owens 2017; Jurinović 2016), this is not the case with drama teaching in Sri Lanka. Art, music, and drama have been an important part of the culture and have played an essential part in the history of Sri Lanka. However, at present, drama is still taught by a lecture-based, chalk and talk method, preparing students for written examinations in the subject. This is the same for every subject and, as a result, the country is facing persistent problems with the quality of its secondary school education. Teaching approaches have failed to keep up with the rapid global changes in society and technology (Sedera 2016; The National Education Commission 2014; UNICEF 2013; World Bank 2011a, 2011b). The focus on students’ learning and reciting of facts is not compatible with the skills young people need for the twenty-first century (World Bank 2017). The education system does not encourage imagination and creative thinking skills (The National Education Commission 2014), and therefore, students do not have an opportunity to develop their creative and initiative abilities and are deficient in conceptual, analytical and critical thinking skills (Perera 2004). This is especially true of the way drama is taught at present in the country.

The place of drama education – a Sri Lankan perspective

In Sri Lanka, ‘Aesthetic education’ is the term used to refer to dancing, drama, music and art subjects. Aesthetic studies form a compulsory component of the integrated curriculum at primary level. However, at junior secondary level students (which caters for young
people aged 12–14 years) select art, dancing, music or drama as an optional subject. This trend continues at the senior secondary level where students need to specialise in subjects which offer opportunities for further study in higher education. Curriculum reforms enacted between 1981 and 2006 have meant that drama as a subject has been included in 1977 – for Grades 12–13 (aged 17-18), in 1992 – for Grades 10 and 11 (aged 15–16), in 2007 for Grade 6 onward (aged 12–14).

However, the emphasis on aesthetic education has failed to challenge Sri Lanka’s exam driven schooling culture. For example, teachers of mathematics and science take time away from the aesthetic subjects if they cannot cover their content in the allocated time to prepare students for exams (Irugalbandara 2011). While the Ministry of Education has attempted to rectify this situation to ensure quality standards in aesthetic education, they have failed to adequately resource it (Irugalbandara 2016; Sedera 2016). For example, the total budget was only Sri Lankan Rupees 3.5 million (19,500 USD) with more money allocated for school beautification, entertainments and physical resources than improvement in the quality of aesthetic education (MoE 2013). Therefore, there is a discord between what the subject of the drama is purported to do in Sri Lanka and how it is actually taught.

Teachers are often required to teach outside of their qualified subject area, as many are appointed due to political, rather than administrative decisions, and there is a lack of qualified teachers in many rural and remote locations. Graduates and non-graduates have been employed without professional qualifications in teaching (NEC 2014; World Bank 2017) with only 20 per cent of teachers having a professional teacher qualification (National Education Commission 2014). This critical shortage of teachers with adequate knowledge in subjects affects students’ learning (Liyanage 2013). Significantly, there is a huge shortage of teachers of Aesthetic subjects, and especially in drama (Irugalbandara 2011).

The problems identified above led to a study of examining the teaching of drama using process drama techniques to increase students’ creativity and adaptability skills. Part of a larger study of a non-randomised control trial of teaching drama by process drama techniques, this study examined two teachers’ perceptions of their experience of teaching drama differently to junior high school students as part of the intervention group.

**Research**

Prior to the main study, the two intervention group teachers participated for one day in an intervention training workshop. The workshop consisted of the theory of process drama and its effectiveness; selected process drama techniques associated with classroom practice; and practising reflection and reflective notes for teacher development and student development. The workshop also gave the teachers practice at microteaching with Sri Lankan undergraduate students. Small group discussions facilitated sharing knowledge and experience with selected process drama techniques. The teachers, one male and one female one male and one female, taught a class of Grade 7 students (ages 11 and 12 years old) with about 30 students, located in two different high schools in Sri Lanka. Both were graduates with degrees in Drama and Theatre education. They were given a manual of lesson plans and ideas to implement for the term.
Data was gathered from ten semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions, with both teachers. Each teacher had four face-to-face meetings with the first author and social communication software (WhatsApp and Viber) interviews consecutively for ten weeks. Each interview ranged from 30 to 45 minutes and were conducted in the teachers’ first language. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, and were transcribed and translated by the first author. Back translations were completed by an official translator in Australia.

Results

There were seven major difficulties that the teachers reported in implementing process drama techniques in their junior high school classes. One difficulty was identified even before the implementation phase; that the teachers, while claiming to know what process drama techniques were, and therefore, selected to participate in the study actually did not understand these techniques. During the pre-intervention workshop, it became clear there was a misunderstanding about process drama and drama processes; the selected teachers understood process drama to be any process of teaching drama, including by lecturing.

This experience highlights the difficulty of cultural and linguistic differences in transferring concepts from different cultures and languages. Each language creates and interprets the phenomena of reality in a different way, according to its peoples’ way of thinking, culture, and geographic location. As such, the cultural and contextual meanings of process drama, alongside technical terms associated with this approach, are difficult to translate from English to Sinhala (the language spoken by the Sinhalese people of Sri Lanka – with whom this study was carried out). The problem is that, like all languages, Sinhala is loaded with cultural terms and expressions. The culturally specific expressions are somehow difficult to translate, even though the researcher was of the same culture and spoke the same language as the teachers. In Australia, process drama is used to describe work where, ‘the participants, together with the teacher (facilitator) constitute the theatrical ensemble and engage in drama to make meaning for themselves’ which includes developing ‘their own play as the narrative and tensions of their drama unfold in time and space’ (Bowel and Heap 2013, 59). In Sri Lanka, teachers understood the term to mean a process, including planning, implementation, evaluation and revision of drama lessons (Author field notes, 22 April 2018).

Another issue experienced by both teachers was the difference between the intervention manual and their regular drama curriculum guide, which was significant. The teachers’ guide included knowledge of drama rather than activities associated with teaching drama. The female teacher said that she preferred the regular teachers’ guide because she knew it all, and teaching differently was very new for her and she needed, therefore, to prepare for this kind of teaching. In Sri Lanka, the design and development of the national school curriculum, syllabus and teachers guides are centralised at the national level by the Ministry of Education. Teachers in this study were reluctant to change their teaching style to incorporate process drama techniques as the traditional materials were easier to use and familiar.

Both teachers reported that in doing process drama they had to prepare lessons. The interview data showed that the teachers in the intervention schools were not used to
preparing or using proper lesson plans but, during the study, they had to prepare for using the new teaching strategies. Teachers said that usually they used the previous year’s notes to read to the class and the students copied them down so there was generally no need to plan or prepare for lessons.

The exam-based education system in Sri Lanka also posed difficulties in the teachers’ implementation of process drama. Teachers in Sri Lanka are responsible for their students’ academic performance in the examinations. As a result, they tend to stick to methods that are tried and tested instead of experimenting with a new and open pedagogical approach like process drama. Both teachers emphasised that exam pressure creates stress for many students and teachers. Further, they indicated that some students believed that engaging with a new, more creative approach would not enhance their grades and a few students in both schools were more eager to learn content knowledge than perform drama. The male teacher noted students’ confidence, self-esteem and motivation to do well were damaged by the present education system. This can be seen in the classroom observations and both teachers reported that students had overly high expectations and that traditional teaching techniques helped students to memorise facts, and therefore, to perform well in exams. Another issue was parental expectations. The parents expect teachers to give lesson notes that focus on assessment by exams. The male teacher said that parents regularly checked their children’s notebook to get some idea whether the teacher taught anything in the lesson. Both teachers said that the parents and students thought that the teachers’ essential duties were to give the students knowledge to do well in the examinations. As a result, they avoided teaching creativity skills through process drama.

Another difficulty was the classroom, including the ways the rooms were set up and the sheer numbers of students in each class. There was a distinct lack of space in the classrooms. The male teacher, for example, had 37 students with desks that filled the space. Further, he pointed out that students struggle with attention and performance due to classroom space that was too crowded. School policies also proved problematic. Both teachers mentioned time pressure and associated limited opportunities to experiment with alternative techniques of teaching and learning, and a lack of support from the school authorities. School authorities pressure the teachers to have the students pass the examinations and get good grades. Failure to do so was a failure of their roles as teachers and parents would also complain.

Discussion

The results showed how difficult it is to introduce change in Sri Lankan education, especially in drama education. However, if Sri Lankan students are to compete for employment, especially internationally, then Sri Lankan drama teachers require a new strategy for teaching drama with a highly effective practical approach. In the Sri Lankan context, the term ‘Process Drama’ is not used and teachers are unaware that this method is used in other countries. This method of teaching drama is not taught at university level even as part of a Drama degree. The results of the intervention study were very positive for students, and these provide a point from which to work to influence the policy of the national ministry of education.

Teaching and learning by rote are very easy for teachers. The teachers involved in this study reported that they did not do any daily lesson preparation for their drama lessons,
even though every teacher in the education sector in Sri Lanka is expected to prepare a complete lesson plan, which identifies the cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domain development for all students (MoE 2013). Preparing for teaching and being organised for successful teaching is at the heart of being an effective teacher (Reed and Michaud 2010). Researchers have found that a blend of teacher preparation, strategies, curricula, settings and assessment for creativity needs to be carried out for teaching that encourages student creativity (Banaji, Cranmer, and Perrotta 2010; Brady and Edelman 2012; Bunt 2009; Cheng 2004). It is concerning that these highly educated teachers felt it was not necessary to plan drama lessons because they used the notes of the previous years. An educational culture that is dominated by examinations would seem to hinder not only the engagement of students but also the engagement of teachers.

These teachers, however, expressed that the examination structure dominates teaching in Sri Lanka and were critical of the present learning context, in which they felt pressured and directed in their teaching. They said that the education system did not support students’ creative thinking or any other creative engagement. In fact, the current Sri Lankan curriculum (MoE 2013) requires schools to develop creativity, although it focuses more on basic knowledge in separate subjects. Assessment of education quality of schools is based on students’ academic achievement and university entrance exams that test knowledge. Parents’ expectations of academic achievement also impact on teachers’ practice and both teachers noted that this limited teaching.

Lack of the space must also be addressed when formulating a new educational policy in Sri Lanka. As noted, the male teacher did not have a proper space to teach process drama and while the female teacher did teach in a separate room, it was also filled with 28 desks and chairs. It could be that class size and space is a barrier to the development of proper student engagement and teaching by process drama in Sri Lanka. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (USA), suitable class sizes provide many advantages: more chances for participation, more specific attention, and better-quality instruction (NCTE 1999), and others have noted the importance of small class sizes for teaching practical drama (Sallis in Drama Australia 2001, 7). Spacious drama classes allow for collaboration and socialisation with peers with many chances for mixing up students in a variety of group work situations. Unfortunately, the atmosphere of the classrooms in which drama is taught is poor in Sri Lanka because they have not been organised for drama, but for teaching any subject. Teachers use the corridor spaces and even playground for practicals. Finally, the teachers in our study did not believe that the school environment and climate encourages the development and fostering of student’s creativity, especially in the drama classroom.

**Implications: a new strategy for teaching drama in Sri Lanka?**

Our research findings could be useful for Sri Lankan policy makers to consider making changes to the rote learning approach to teaching drama. Process drama has been demonstrated by this study to enhance student creativity and adaptability. However, other approaches to teaching drama could also be beneficial, provided that they were evidenced-based in the Sri Lankan context. In advocating at a national policy level, however, suitable spaces will need to be built to allow this different form of teaching to occur. In addition, teachers’ skills would need to be nurtured to teach in this way. Moreover,
there would need to be training of university drama educators to teach pre-service teachers different ways of teaching drama rather than by giving notes to students.

However, before any of these proposals to the Sri Lankan government are made, the education department would seriously need to consider the domination of the examination based system, for all subjects, but especially for assessment of drama. Parents and teachers are rightly concerned that students would not pass the rote examination in drama subjects if process drama was the way that drama was taught. New assessment, as well as a new teaching pedagogy, would have to be embraced. We are hopeful for a receptive government response as the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka was involved in the present study and the first author has a pre-existing professional relationship with the Director of Drama education and assistant directors at the provincial level.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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