



## THE POWER AND PROMISE OF THEATRE EDUCATION

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Theatre, the imitation or representation of life performed for other people, exists in every culture in every era. Although frequently thought of only as entertainment, the imagined and enacted world of theatre is also one of the primary ways children learn about life: about actions and consequences, about customs and beliefs, about others and themselves.

Although outstanding theatre education programs exist in numerous elementary and secondary schools around the country, not everyone is aware of the importance and power of drama in education and life. Schools resist reallocating time and money for teaching the arts because of misunderstandings about what constitutes an arts education and how children learn. For these and other reasons, the arts have yet to be fully incorporated into the basic school curriculum.

### **Lets put on a show**

The “let’s-put-on-a-show” myth is one explanation. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, MGM Studios made musicals, starring Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, that shared the same basic plot: a group of talented kids gather in a backyard or barn and overnight stage a critically acclaimed play. It’s unfortunate for arts education that many people have accepted this myth as all it takes to produce good theatre. In reality, if all it took was a group of precocious children, a vacant lot, a pocketful of change, and a few days to envision, write, design, construct, rehearse, and perform a play, then quality theatre (and film and television) would be commonplace in schools and daily life.

Other misconceptions about the importance of theatre education need addressing, as well. *All* students, not just the designated “gifted-and-talented,” have the ability and should have the opportunity to engage in theatre. And that means more than just taking an occasional field trip to see a play. William Shakespeare observed that “the play is the thing,” but the power and promise of theatre education lie not only in students observing drama on the stage and screen, but also in their creating and evaluating their own theatre in the classroom.

## **Natural actors**

From birth, children instinctively use pretend play as a means of making sense of the world. They observe and respond to their environment. They imitate words and actions. They create situations to play and assume roles. They interact with peers and arrange space and objects to bring their stories to life. They direct one another to bring order to dramatic play. And they respond to one another's dramas. In other words, children arrive at school with rudimentary skills as playwrights, actors, designers, directors, and audience members.

The approach to theatre education, as envisioned in the National Standards for Arts Education, builds on this foundation. In an effort to create a seamless transition from the natural skills of pretend play to the formal study of theatre, the Standards call for instruction that integrates all components of the art form. With opportunities to write scripts, act, design, direct, research, compare art forms, analyze, critique, and understand social and historical contexts, all students, from kindergartners to seniors in high school, can experience theatre from its many and different perspectives.

## **Comprehensive theatre education**

Some educators refer to a comprehensive theatre program as being *discipline-based*. Discipline-based means that the education program provides a sequential and cumulative learning continuum that involves the processes of creating, interpreting, understanding contexts, and valuing aesthetics. A discipline-based program provides for individual development and expression; collaborative creation of theatre; exploration of theatre in its multicultural, social, and historical contexts; and aesthetic appreciation of theatrical experiences and events.

Such a program involves students as active learners in a diversity of challenging and evocative experiences developing the whole person physically, intellectually, and emotionally. The ensemble nature of theatre not only enables but requires students and the teacher to work collaboratively in various roles to solve intellectual, creative, communicative, and evaluative problems. It develops language and communication abilities, higher-order thinking, and creativity. It stimulates logical and intuitive thinking, personalizes knowledge and yields aesthetic pleasure.

The study of theatre clarifies attitudes and ethical and moral standards of behavior as it promotes positive self-concepts, social awareness, and empathy. It also motivates and facilitates learning in other content areas and improves learning retention through multisensory instruction. When presented in a sequence that takes what has been learned and builds upon a spiral of concepts and processes, a discipline-based theatre program develops skills, knowledge, and sensitivity basic to a complete education.

**What can you do to help realize this vision?**

The power and promise of theatre can be claimed *today* by students in every classroom. We don't have to wait for expensive equipment and facilities. Given the chance to create their own dramas and attend plays presented by others, students can be transported to worlds past, present, and future – the ultimate in “virtual reality.” Students are intuitively equipped with the skills and imagination to walk in other's shoes, developing understanding and empathy as they explore complex realities and limitless possibilities.

Following are actions that parents and families can take to support theatre education:

- Examine your children's class schedules and report cards to see if theatre and the other arts are included among the core subjects. If they are not, then work with administrators and teachers to provide discipline-based theatre and arts education programs for all students.
- Regularly attend quality plays and films with your children and discuss and evaluate your experiences afterwards.
- Learn more about the art of theatre and the power of theatre education.

**Resources**

To find out more about theatre education, subscribe to publications and attend workshops provided by the following:

American Alliance for Theatre and Education  
Theatre Department  
Arizona State University  
P.O. Box 873411  
Tempe, AZ 85287-3411  
480-965-6064  
<http://www.aate.com/index.htm>

Educational Theatre Association  
2343 Auburn Ave.  
Cincinnati, OH 45219  
513 421-3900  
<http://www.etassoc.org/>