

Exploring the Role of Drama and Theatre in Moral Education: Theories and Practices

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Abstract:

Moral education plays a crucial role in personal development. A Chinese saying aptly illustrates its importance: “A man cannot stand without integrity; a country cannot prosper without morality.” Similarly, England emphasizes the significance of moral education in children’s growth. According to Section 78 of the UK Education Act of 2002, schools are responsible for promoting “the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental, and physical development of pupils at the school and in society.” Under this Act, the Department for Education has proposed non-statutory guidance for schools on actively promoting fundamental values. This guidance includes moral principles such as: (1) Encouraging students to respect and tolerate people of all faiths, races, and cultures; (2) Cultivating students’ self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-confidence; (3) Motivating students to take responsibility for their actions and understand how they can contribute to their schools and society; (4) Ensuring students recognize the importance of combating discrimination. These points, among others, demonstrate the emphasis British education places on students’ moral development. Therefore, educators must consider how to achieve these objectives—how to instill belief in moral standards and encourage adherence to moral rules. However, this task is challenging due to differing opinions on moral education. As Joe Winston highlights, morality is a complex area that elicits profound disagreement.

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Rules

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1. Introduction

In Michael Hand’s book *A Theory of Moral Education*, two distinct societal claims regarding moral education are debated and analyzed^[1]. The first claim suggests that “morality is caught rather than taught,” implying that

moral education is unnecessary and that children’s moral development does not require deliberate adult facilitation. However, this claim is flawed. Hand argues that moral direction and guidance are integral to parenting and teaching, forming a universal feature of upbringing. From

a young age, children learn through parental responses, such as punishment for violent behavior, dishonesty, or disrespect, helping them understand that these actions are wrong and fostering feelings of guilt and regret. As David Gauthier emphasizes, rewards for success, admonitions, or punishments for failures are principal methods to cultivate moral dispositions in children, helping them acquire moral virtues. Furthermore, Gauthier highlights the moral significance of emotions like guilt and shame, which enable children to resist temptations, such as taking things that do not belong to them, through moral training and incentives ^[2,3].

The second claim argues that “morality is innate rather than acquired.” This perspective posits that human beings, as social animals, are biologically predisposed to moral behavior. Hand acknowledges that humans derive happiness from friendship, social interaction, cooperation, and empathy, which form the basis of moral consciousness. Similarly, Gauthier asserts that social interaction provides the raw material for developing moral awareness, as seen in children’s natural desire to please others and their sympathetic responses to others’ emotions ^[2]. However, Hand warns against conflating innate prosocial tendencies with morality, emphasizing that morality involves actions regulated by subscribed standards, which differ from behaviors driven by sympathy alone ^[1].

The distinction between morality and sympathy lies in motivation. Helping others out of discomfort caused by their pain is driven by sympathy, not morality. Joe Winston elaborates that morality, unlike sympathy, is governed by a moral code—a set of standards that dictate what individuals should or should not do ^[3]. Moral actions stem from adherence to these codes rather than natural empathy. Hand underscores that morality requires training, much like language acquisition. While humans are biologically equipped for morality, individuals must be introduced to moral codes and guided to follow them. Hand concludes:

“Morality and language are rule-governed social practices into which infant human beings must be initiated... morality is acquired rather than innate and must be taught as well as caught.”

For educators, the goal of moral education is not to impose moral rules directly but to develop

children’s ability to think independently and evaluate the legitimacy and rationality of moral standards. George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, highlights that the toughest moral decisions often involve conflicts between competing rights rather than simple distinctions between right and wrong ^[4]. Knowing moral rules does not guarantee adherence, and Hand emphasizes the importance of fostering independent moral judgment in children ^[5]. Just as religious education seeks to cultivate religious autonomy rather than faith, moral education requires impartial guidance rather than imposition ^[6].

As early as 1984, educational pioneer Nellie McCaslin advocated the benefits of drama study in moral education ^[7]. McCaslin argued that drama strengthens critical thinking, fosters moral and spiritual values, promotes understanding and appreciation of diverse cultural values, encourages cooperation, and highlights the necessity of rules. While the goal is not to claim that drama inherently makes children more moral, it is vital to explore the relationship between drama and moral education. This includes examining the role drama and theatre play in moral education, how they contribute to children’s moral development, and the specific skills and values children can acquire through drama practices.

2. Dramatic play, rules, and moral education

According to Winston, while dramatic activity is shaped by culture, it originates from the innate human tendency to play. Play is a natural ability that humans exhibit from childhood. Roger Wooster suggests that the ability to play is a “prerequisite” for drama and theatre, serving as a cornerstone of individual development ^[8]. One of the greatest obstacles to personal development is the fear of failure. Way identifies that drama can address this issue by offering situations of “what happens if...?” This underscores the moral potential of dramatic play, which provides a safe space for children to explore both physical practice and moral reflection without fear of making mistakes. As Jerome Bruner notes, “play is an activity that is without frustrating consequences for the child even though it is a serious activity” ^[9].

An illustrative example is the game “Keep the Key.” Participants form a circle to create the play area, and once

the game begins, silence is mandatory. One participant in the center protects the key under their chair, while a challenger attempts to steal it undetected. In a drama session, this game was played twice in a dramatic context, offering distinct moral experiences.

In the first version, the central character was a guard who would be executed by the king if the treasure key was stolen. The challenger was a farmer who needed the key to access jewels to save his critically ill wife. This scenario presents a moral dilemma: if the guard allows the farmer to steal the key, he faces death; if he prevents the theft, he fulfills his duty but at a moral cost. Similarly, the farmer's act of stealing is driven by noble intent, but the morality of his actions is questionable. This setup raises critical questions: What defines right and wrong? How are moral choices made? Winston emphasizes that when children face moral dilemmas in drama, the value lies not in the decisions they make but in their ability to articulate reasons for their choices.

The second version took place in a forest, with participants playing as animals. The key keeper was a hunter who had captured a small bear, and the objective was to rescue the bear by stealing the key. A humorous incident occurred during this version: the game's rules specified silence, yet some participants deliberately made noises to distract the hunter, who was blindfolded. Surprisingly, the teacher did not intervene. Initially, this rule-breaking surprised and confused me, but as more students joined in, I noticed their actions were motivated by empathy. When asked about the decision to make noise, one student explained, "I don't know, I just did it. I felt nervous and wanted to free the little bear." This response reflects Winston's claim that "moral action is determined as much by feeling as it is by reason, and the two operate together to inform the agency." The drama fostered moral reflection and action through active engagement in role-playing and contextualized games.

Jean Piaget posits that children learn to respect rules during games while simultaneously understanding how to adapt them, a foundation for moral development^[10]. In the example above, breaking the rules to rescue the bear demonstrated moral growth. The motivation to act was not rooted in a desire to disrupt the game but rather in compassion and a moral compass. Richard Sennett notes that "rules are not immutable truths but

conventions"^[11,12]. However, this does not suggest that rules can be changed arbitrarily. Sigmund Freud asserts that when play becomes socially essential—such as in theatre or sports—participants and observers must adhere to agreed-upon rules to ensure the success of the interaction. For drama audiences, this requires a code of social conduct^[13]. Émile Durkheim further emphasizes that respect for discipline, group collaboration, and an understanding of moral and social rules are integral to moral development^[14].

3. Drama as a learning medium

Forum Theatre is a participatory theatre technique created by Augusto Boal, which holds significant potential for moral education due to its emphasis on active participation. According to Tony Jackson, Forum Theatre is also referred to as "oppressed theatre," where the protagonist, identified as the "oppressed," faces specific challenges^[15]. The drama revolves around the problems the protagonist encounters, and spectators are invited to resolve these issues by recalling and identifying key moments of the performance. In simpler terms, the audience can empathize with the protagonist by saying "stop" and proposing alternative ways to address the crisis. This form of participation is valuable for enhancing moral experience because it fosters reflection. For instance, when someone observes immoral behavior that harms others, they may reflect on their own actions and consider what constitutes appropriate behavior.

Participation in drama is crucial to moral education for several reasons. It aligns closely with experiential learning. According to David A. Kolb, experiential learning plays an increasingly significant role in individual development^[16]. This type of learning allows participants to construct their own meaning rather than passively receive knowledge. Participation in drama encourages individuals to take responsibility for their learning process. Freire emphasizes that the degree of participation, effort, and "two-way dialogue" inherent in drama activities helps to embed learning, develop a sense of ownership, and empower learners. These principles align with the goals of moral education, which aim to cultivate moral autonomy in students.

Additionally, participation in drama serves as a

rehearsal for reality, preparing individuals for real-life moral decision-making. However, as John Dewey suggests, “experience on its own is not necessarily educational,” meaning that mere participation does not automatically result in learning ^[17,18]. More importantly, if participants’ engagement is unstructured, disorganized, or unreasonable, their experiences may become chaotic and devoid of meaning. Thus, the structure and guidance within participatory drama are essential to ensure that the experience contributes effectively to moral education.

4. Conclusion

Moral education has always been a central focus in the field of education due to its profound impact on personal development. Many countries have introduced relevant regulations to encourage schools to enhance students’ moral capacities. This article primarily addresses moral education within the UK. Given that morality is a complex and often divisive topic, the discussion begins by exploring two opposing debates about moral education.

The first debate questions whether “morality is caught rather than taught.” This perspective is not supported here, as moral education, albeit informal, begins in childhood through parents’ rewards or punishments, which act as a form of moral guidance. The second claim posits that morality is innate rather than acquired. However, this argument conflates natural human compassion with morality, which is motivated by distinct factors. For educators, the focus should be on cultivating children’s ability to think independently and assess the rationality of moral concepts—a goal that aligns with drama pedagogy, which emphasizes critical thinking and the exploration of moral and spiritual dimensions through dramatic activities.

To explore the relationship between drama and

morality, the discussion emphasizes the role of stories and dramatic narratives. Historically, stories have served as a tool for conveying moral lessons and teaching behavioral norms. The visual and auditory elements of dramatic narratives enhance moral engagement, allowing individuals to immerse themselves in the dilemmas faced by characters and reflect on moral issues. The unique shifts in time, space, and character within a theatrical performance further intensify the moral experience. The stage’s flexibility—where years can unfold in moments—highlights the motivations and consequences of actions with clarity, making moral issues more accessible. Drama distills the complexities of moral life into a refined and engaging form, allowing audiences to derive moral insights through actors’ performances and symbolic elements.

The article also examines the significance of play and forum theatre for moral education, using examples from drama sessions to illustrate the interplay between games, drama, and morality. In the safe environment offered by play and drama, children develop their moral reasoning, learn the importance of rules, and understand the value of collaboration. Forum theatre, in particular, fosters moral reflection by allowing the audience to address the protagonist’s moral crises in various ways, providing opportunities to evaluate the rationality of their moral choices.

This article acknowledges certain limitations. It does not address the shortcomings of using drama as a medium for moral education, nor does it delve deeply into the moral dilemmas presented in the games due to knowledge constraints and length restrictions. These aspects warrant further exploration in future research to deepen the understanding of ethical dilemmas and their resolution in drama-based moral education.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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