Theatres, play and comedy can encourage a love of reading

LITERACY
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The performing arts have always had a difficult time proving their value in an education system that prioritises maths and science. Too few studies have been done to prove their benefits, such as building children’s imaginations, vocabularies and language skills.

When Clowns Without Borders South Africa — an artist-led humanitarian organisation that uses laughter and play to improve the psychosocial conditions of children and communities in crisis — was asked to develop a show to support Na’ibali, South Africa’s national reading-for-enjoyment campaign, the questions we asked ourselves were: Is this possible? Can the performing arts be directly correlated with promoting literacy in children?

Although there is no substantial proof that children’s participation in the arts will make them voracious readers — or readers at all — there is evidence for the power of play to increase the chances of children trying something new.

Of course, in the same way that teaching maths to children does not guarantee they will become mathematicians, introducing them to the performing arts is not about turning them into artists. It is about providing them with meaningful skills that will assist them in becoming contributing members of society, whatever their profession.

As Lyn Gardner so wonderfully articulated in her article, “Why children’s theatre matters” (The Guardian, 2013), theatre “gives our children the skills and the creativity necessary to face the world, to understand it and perhaps to change it too”.

The problem is the performing arts provide skills in abstract thought, compassion, empathy and self-awareness, and are often the first to go when school budgets get cut.

So what happens if a child is not confident enough to read, does not know where to get books or feels intimidated entering a library? What if they have no caregivers who sit and read with them?

This is where theatre can play an important role. Meaningful theatre-based workshops that give children and adults an opportunity to play can encourage them to try new things.

For example, after a show for grade Rs with learning disabilities, we asked children to draw what they had enjoyed most about the performance. One of the teachers approached the facilitator respectfully, saying not to expect much from one particular child because of her learning difficulties.

In less than five minutes, the child had drawn her favourite part of the performance, entirely unaided by her teacher or any other assistant. The teacher was shocked, unable to understand why the same results had not been achieved in the classroom.

The performing arts cannot work miracles. It requires time and commitment from adults, caregivers and teachers to foster the spirit of play, wonder and curiosity without the implications and pressures of academic achievement.

This relaxed and playful approach is similar to how Na’ibali is growing a culture of reading across South Africa. It does this by providing children and care-givers access to engaging and relevant books and stories in their home languages, as well as frequent opportunities to read and enjoy them in relaxed and safe spaces.

How will we be using this powerful synergy to collaborate? By bringing the power of stories and performance to people in KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Limpopo, we will be inviting adults and children to experience their local libraries in new ways. It will give them the opportunity to relax in and get to know spaces that have sometimes been seen as off-limits or intimidating, and encourage them to fall in love with books and reading and become passionate library users.

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