

From Text to Performance: Pedagogical and Creative Approaches in Drama

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the implementation of the creative drama process in classroom teaching through the school play *I Want to Go Home*, based on motifs from Jasminka Petrović's book. The focus is on the process itself rather than the final product—the performance. Through activities such as exploration, improvisation, scriptwriting, and staging, students cultivated creativity, empathy, critical thinking, and self-confidence. Particular attention was given to contemporary issues relevant to students' lives, including family relationships, boundaries in upbringing, and critical reflection on parental roles. The study also presents the educational outcomes and includes a critical review by a professional jury at the Festival of Teachers' Stage Creativity, which underscores the pedagogical value of this approach.

Keywords: creative drama process, educational outcomes, contemporary issues, teaching practice, school leadership.

1. Introduction

Drama in education is not merely an artistic expression but also a pedagogical method that enables students to learn through exploration and creativity. The creative drama process encourages children to take an active role in their learning, to immerse themselves in roles, and to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors through these roles.

The play *I Want to Go Home* emerged from the author's teaching practice as a response to the need for students to express their perspectives on parent–child relationships, love, expectations, and boundaries. The play does not provide ready-made answers; rather, it opens a space for critical reflection and dialogue.

2. Theoretical framework

The creative drama process in education involves learning through role-play, improvisation, analysis, and staged realization. Its essence lies not in the final product but in the process itself—through collaborative exploration, communication, and cooperation among students. According to Heathcote and Bolton (1995), drama in education should not be viewed solely as an art form but as a means of experiential learning, enabling students to question reality and their own values.

O'Neill (1995) emphasizes that the drama process provides a “safe framework” in which students can explore different situations and perspectives, simultaneously developing emotional and social intelligence. Gavrilović (2016) highlights that the use of drama techniques in teaching contributes to the development of critical thinking and social competencies, as students become more aware of relationships, emotions, and the consequences of their actions through active participation in the learning process.

The application of drama methods is based on the principles of active and experiential learning, where students acquire knowledge and skills through action, reflection, and dialogue. In this process, the teacher assumes the role of a guide and facilitator rather than a traditional lecturer (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; Gavrilović, 2016).

Frequently used techniques within the drama process include improvisation, role-play, writing in role, frozen images, and guided drama. These techniques foster students' imagination, empathy, and communication skills, while also enabling them to view the world and their environment from multiple perspectives (O'Neill, 1995). Contemporary scholars additionally emphasize the importance of connecting drama activities with students' life experiences. Petrović (2018), through the example of the book *I Want to Go Home*, demonstrates how themes such as family relationships, friendship, and the search for one's place in the world resonate with children and can serve as a foundation for dramatic work. Such themes allow students to express personal feelings through artistic play, support understanding of others, and promote mutual trust.

Integrating drama activities into regular classroom teaching can yield multiple pedagogical benefits: it increases students' motivation to learn, facilitates understanding of abstract concepts, and contributes to the creation of a positive classroom climate. In this way, drama becomes a bridge between curricular content and students' real-life experiences. Therefore, it can be concluded that the creative drama process in education enables students to learn through experience, exploration, and collaboration. It fosters the development of critical thinking, empathy, self-confidence, and communication skills, while allowing teachers to cultivate an experiential and humanistically oriented educational environment through play and art (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; O'Neill, 1995; Gavrilović, 2016; Petrović, 2018).

3. Methodology

The play analyzed in this study was developed and performed at “Milorad Mića Marković” Elementary School in Mala Ivanča (Sopot Municipality). Students from the lower grades participated in both the preparation and realization of the play, collaboratively creating the performance over several months of rehearsals and creative work.

During the preparation and performance of the play, the following phases of work could be identified and distinguished:

1. Reading and analyzing the book *I Want to Go Home* by Jasminka Petrović.
2. Discussions about the characters and their motivations.
3. Improvisation and exploration of different parental roles.
4. Writing and adapting the script.
5. Designing the set and costumes, employing simple and symbolic solutions.
6. Assigning roles and conducting rehearsals with ongoing analysis.

7. Public performance of the play and participation in the Festival of Teachers' Stage Creativity.

4. Description of the play's realization

The play *I Want to Go Home* follows a young girl, Tamara, who, dissatisfied with her parents, decides to "change" them and sets out in search of "better parents." During her adventure, she encounters three types of "new parents": the child-mother, caring but overprotective parents, and strict parents with excessive demands. Through these encounters, Tamara comes to realize that perfect parents do not exist and that her real parents, despite their flaws, are the best for her.

The play employs symbolism and theatrical devices to depict Tamara's experiences and the child's inner world. For example, cushions placed on the back of the caring father symbolize the weight of all the responsibilities he assumes for his child. Lighting, music, and props—such as chairs, dolls, and balls—are used to bring to life the emotional changes and dynamics between Tamara and the various types of parents.

Interestingly, students also addressed practical challenges creatively. For instance, when an actor for the father-child role could not be found, a spontaneous idea emerged to incorporate this absence into the story: in one scene, Tamara questions where her father is and attempts to answer herself, addressing the audience with, "Maybe my dad is yet to be born?" This approach added an interactive, humorous, and symbolic layer to the scene, while teaching the students how to solve challenges creatively in stage performance.

Through humor, fantasy, and emotional situations, the play *I Want to Go Home* conveys a powerful message about the value of family, love, and acceptance of parents, emphasizing that no parent is perfect, but they are the right parents for their child. Consequently, during the preparation and performance of the play, discussions with students were conducted on this theme, encouraging them to identify the key lessons of the play, which undoubtedly represents a significant element of this drama process.

5. Phases of preparing the play

During the preparation and realization of the play *I Want to Go Home*, the process was organized through several clearly defined phases, which included pedagogical goals, students' creative contributions, and the teacher's role:

1. Reading and analyzing the book

Students read *I Want to Go Home* by Jasminka Petrović and noted key events, characters, and conflicts. They discussed the themes addressed in the book, such as family relationships, boundaries in upbringing, and different parenting styles.

- *Pedagogical goal:* Developing critical thinking, reading literacy, and the ability to recognize values and messages in a literary text.
- *Teacher's role:* Guided the discussion, posed questions that encouraged reflection, and connected the text to students' real-life experiences.

2. Character analysis and motivation

Students explored the characters' traits and motivations, identified conflicts and internal emotions, formulated hypotheses about characters' behavior, and predicted possible outcomes of scenes.

- *Pedagogical goal:* Developing empathy, perspective-taking, and emotional literacy.

- *Teacher's role:* Led the analysis, asked challenging questions, and moderated the discussion.

3. Improvisation and role exploration

Through guided improvisations, students experimented with characters' behaviors, reactions, and emotions. They created short scenes exploring different situations and relationships between characters.

- *Pedagogical goal:* Strengthening creativity, social and emotional intelligence, and the ability for spontaneous expression.
- *Teacher's role:* Facilitated improvisations and encouraged students to explore different options and resolve conflicts through play.

4. Writing and adapting the script

Students actively participated in creating dialogue, symbolic scenes, and the sequence of events. They combined ideas from improvisations with the planned narrative, guided by script adaptation.

- *Pedagogical goal:* Developing creative writing skills, cooperative work, and critical thinking about the stage narrative.
- *Teacher's role:* Advised during the writing process, made corrections, and structured the script's development.

5. Set and costume design

Students created symbolic props, designed costumes, and shaped the stage space with practical and aesthetic solutions. They developed ideas that visually supported the narrative and symbolism of the play.

- *Pedagogical goal:* Developing aesthetic and practical thinking, creative expression, and teamwork.
- *Teacher's role:* Coordinated and guided the design process, encouraging innovative solutions.

6. Role assignment and guided rehearsals

Students chose roles, learned stage movements, dialogues, and interactions. Rehearsals included performance analysis, feedback, and reflection on their own and others' roles.

- *Pedagogical goal:* Strengthening confidence, public performance skills, teamwork, and critical assessment of performance.
- *Teacher's role:* Led rehearsals, provided constructive feedback, and fostered students' independence and responsibility.

7. Developing interactive and improvised scenes

Students learned to creatively solve problems that arose during preparation or performance (e.g., missing actor or props). They involved the audience in scenes, creating interactive and humorous elements.

- *Pedagogical goal:* Developing flexibility, innovation, adaptability, and collaborative problem-solving skills.
- *Teacher's role:* Facilitated improvisations and stimulated creative thinking in real situations.

8. Public performance, evaluation, and reflection

The play was performed before an audience, and the evaluation included feedback from a professional jury, teachers, and the students themselves. During the performance, attention was focused not only on the final result but also on the process leading up to it – all activities from

reading and analyzing the book, through improvisations, scriptwriting, and guided rehearsals, to set and costume design.

Reflecting on the process involved critically reviewing all phases of preparation and performance. Students and the teacher analyzed what worked well, which activities contributed to learning, and where challenges arose. Particular attention was paid to each student's and the team's contribution, their ability to solve problems creatively, flexibility in unexpected situations, and adaptability.

The goal of reflection was for students to recognize their personal development through the process: how much they improved critical thinking, creativity, empathy, social skills, and self-confidence. Feedback from the professional jury, teachers, and students themselves allowed for connecting experiences to real life and reinforcing the messages conveyed by the play – the importance of family, understanding different parenting approaches, and the value of teamwork.

This approach empowered students to value the creative process itself as a key part of learning, developing self-awareness, responsibility, and cultural literacy. In this way, the play became not only an artistic product but also a means of pedagogical and emotional development, encouraging students to learn about themselves and the world around them through creative play and reflection.

6. Results and educational effects

The educational effects of the play are multifaceted, encompassing the emotional, social, and intellectual development of children. Through the narrative and symbolism, students learn about the importance of understanding different approaches to parenting, recognizing that parents can be strict, caring, or overprotective, while every individual has strengths and weaknesses. In this way, children develop empathy—the ability to put themselves in others' positions and understand others' emotions—which aids them in daily life and interpersonal communication.

The play also fosters critical thinking, as students follow Tamara's decision-making process, reflect on what it means to have perfect parents, and draw their own conclusions regarding values, rules, and boundaries. By interacting with different characters, students are trained to analyze situations, compare behaviors, and recognize the consequences of various decisions.

Through stage play, improvisation, and audience interaction, emotional literacy is developed—children learn to recognize, express, verbalize, understand, and regulate their own emotions. This contributes to greater self-awareness and social competence.

The play additionally promotes creativity, as students actively participate in shaping the text, staging, and symbolism during the preparation process, finding original solutions to practical challenges, such as the absence of an actor or the creation of symbolic props. This process fosters imagination, resourcefulness, adaptability, innovation, and problem-solving skills.

Through teamwork and collaborative performance, children gain self-confidence—they learn to express their opinions, perform in front of an audience, and trust in their abilities. Social skills and cooperation are also developed, as students must negotiate, coordinate, and support each other throughout the preparation and performance of the play.

Overall, the play *I Want to Go Home*, through humor, fantasy, and emotional situations, contributes to the development of a well-rounded child, helping them better

understand the world around them, evaluate family values appropriately, and cultivate abilities crucial for healthy emotional and social development.

7. Comments from the Professional Jury

The play received numerous praises at the festival:

- “The main character does not merely act, she lives her role, improvises, and is convincing at every moment.”
- “The text is strong, with a clear message that family is the most important and parental love is paramount.”
- “The set design is clear, and the lighting enhances the atmosphere.”
- “The lead actress is fantastic—spontaneous, convincing, and completely natural.”
- Zoltan Fridman: “The play is an example of well-constructed dialogue and stage action. The joy of all performers is evident.”

8. Critical reflection

The greatest value of this drama process lies in the fact that the focus was on the process itself—students were active creators rather than mere performers. They learned how to shape the text, convey messages through play, and learn from one another. The contemporary theme of family relationships proved far more relatable to students than traditional fairy tales. On stage, they recognized situations from their own lives, which facilitated deeper learning, understanding, and reflection.

9. Reflection from the school principal’s perspective

This play was developed while the author of this paper was working as a teacher. Today, from the perspective of a school principal, the author evaluates its value in a broader context. As a principal, it is evident that the experience gained from such work can be directly applied to encourage teachers to use drama techniques in the classroom, to strengthen the school’s cultural role through public performances, and to foster collaboration with the local community.

The author’s teaching practice clearly demonstrates that innovative forms of work can be successfully scaled to the level of the entire school and become part of its culture and identity.

10. Conclusion

The play *I Want to Go Home* confirms that the creative drama process in schools is not merely a creative-artistic activity, but an effective educational and pedagogical method. Students gained new experiences, acquired public speaking and critical thinking skills, and simultaneously developed empathy and responsibility. Such examples of good practice should be incorporated into school life, as they empower students and transform the school into a space for innovation and cultural activities.

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