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The Art of Storytelling.

The Educational-Cultural Program Based on the "Grow Through Stories" Method

ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

This research is based primarily on the professional experience accumulated over 14 years of activity, starting in 2011, in the field of directing and performing storytelling-based shows within primary education institutions in various localities such as Arad, Lipova, Ineu, Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca, and Bucharest. The professional experience also includes the delivery of training courses for teachers, focused on the use of storytelling as a didactic method, in collaboration with S.C. AtelieR de Cuvinte S.R.L. from Timișoara and the "Alexandru Gavra" Teacher Training Center (Casa Corpului Didactic) in Arad. These activities materialized in the organization of ten in-person training editions held in Arad, Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca, and Bucharest, attended by a total of 180 participants, as well as ten online editions, with a total of 378 participants.

Secondly, the observation of the beneficial effects of storytelling on students' cognitive and creative development, along with the growing interest of teachers in deepening their understanding of this pedagogical method, led to a more focused approach to integrating storytelling courses into the primary education process. At the same time, the implementation of an optional storytelling and improvisation course in the school curriculum was considered, as a complementary means of developing students' competencies.

Based on these professional experiences in the field of education through storytelling, the present study aims to rigorously investigate the impact of the art of storytelling on the development of creativity, imagination, and memory among primary school students, particularly those aged 7 to 9. Furthermore, the research seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of this method within the teaching-learning process, as well as its role in the consolidation and assessment of knowledge.

The individual's acute need for authentic, direct, and natural communication with others is manifested through the desire to "have a story" with others—a fundamental and accessible way of fulfilling this need. The act of sharing stories represents a return to the roots of human communication, to the simplicity of direct exchanges of ideas and emotions, creating a space of profound interaction in which words gain shared meaning for all participants. Storytelling is not limited to a unidirectional transfer of information from the narrator to the audience; it is shaped as an interactive process, a co-constructed narrative that transcends simple communication and becomes an act of communion achieved through spoken words.

The subject of storytelling, as a branch of the performing arts, was chosen for this research because it represents a form of interpretive expression in which direct interaction with the audience constitutes a central element. Storytelling involves an ephemeral, unique, and unrepeatable artistic act in which improvisation plays an essential role. This type of performance takes place in an open space, without backstage areas, where the storyteller is in direct contact with the audience, without technical support or aesthetic artifices interfering in the narrative process. The authentic and exposed nature of the storyteller, as well as the challenge of navigating between the safety of the story and the unpredictability of audience interaction, are defining elements of this art form.

The discovery of storytelling occurred in 2011, in an unexpected context, through a collaboration with the "Alexandru D. Xenopol" County Library in Arad. Since then, the research and application of this practice have developed both in the performative area and in the theoretical field, with reference to the concept of storytelling as it is defined and accepted at the international level. The professional experience accumulated includes fields such as acting, improvisation, storytelling, pedagogy applied in the art of acting and narrative, as well as directing, thus shaping an interdisciplinary approach that explores the multiple dimensions of storytelling in education and performance.

Over the course of fourteen years, educational and artistic activities were carried out with primary school students, aiming to create theatre and/or storytelling performances. During this period, various ways of conveying stories were explored, at times using stage props and elements of theatrical syncretism, or conversely, adopting a minimalist aesthetic reinterpreted from a personal perspective. Additionally, since 2012, there has been the opportunity to represent Romania as a storytelling artist, participating in international storytelling festivals around the world: Iran, Kenya, Thailand, South Korea, Canada, India, France, Italy, Poland, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Morocco, Lithuania, and Hungary.

This practical experience gradually allowed me to develop and refine my own method, defining a specific structure for the storytelling performance—centered on the narrated story, but enriched through theatrical techniques and improvisation exercises. In this way, I combined the artistic and pedagogical dimensions, becoming, in essence, a storyteller-educator.

After nine years of research, in 2020 I finalized an applicable storytelling method, materialized in the educational-cultural program consisting of workshops based on the "Grow Through Stories" method. Once the artistic component was established and optimized, my interest turned to the educational impact of this method, investigating the competencies developed among its direct beneficiaries, namely primary school students. The results highlighted the considerable potential of storytelling as a training tool, reinforcing my motivation to further explore this cultural-educational dimension.

The central hypothesis of my research is the following: the application of the "Grow Through Stories" method among second-grade students, over the course of a school year (10 months), with a frequency of one session per month, within the subject "Personal Development," will contribute to the development of self-awareness and empathy skills, essential components of emotional intelligence. The action-research was carried out between September 2022 and June 2023 through the implementation of the cultural-educational program consisting of ten workshop-lessons based on the "Grow Through Stories" method in three lower secondary education institutions in the city of Arad. Each month of the 2022–2023 school year included the delivery of one workshop in a second-grade class that had no prior experience with this type of activity and had not been previously exposed to the concept of storytelling. The methodology employed maintained a consistent instructional structure, while each workshop was based on a distinct story addressing different themes.

The main objective of the workshops was to stimulate the emotional mechanisms of self-awareness and empathy in students, through the messages conveyed, the characters, and the dramatic situations included in the stories. The impact was evaluated using observation sheets after each session, applying five specific items aligned with the competencies of self-awareness and empathy, as outlined in the national curriculum for the subject *Personal Development* in the second grade.

In addition, at the end of each workshop, students were given an assignment for the following session, intended to reinforce information retention and facilitate the transferability of the educational message to their social lives.

The analysis of data collected through the evaluation methods used—observation sheets, practical assignments, projects, and interviews—led to the conclusion that the "Grow Through

Stories" method not only supports the development of empathy and self-awareness among students, but may also represent a replicable methodology for teachers. Thus, educators can integrate this approach into the teaching of *Personal Development* at the primary level, both as part of the compulsory curriculum and as an optional activity conducted throughout the school year.

CHAPTER I. Storytelling
Storytelling – A General Perspective

The first chapter analyzes the concept of storytelling from a general perspective, highlighting how it is currently perceived in various fields such as art, education, therapy, marketing, and public discourse. Subsequently, a historical overview is provided of the evolution of storytelling at the international level, beginning with the earliest storytellers of humanity and continuing with the development of this practice in the 20th century across different continents—America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. In the third part of the chapter, the situation of storytelling in Romania is presented, starting from the oral tradition of rural storytelling and its functions, up to the transformations that occurred after the 1990s. The institutionalization of storytelling in libraries and schools, the emergence of specialized festivals, and the way this practice is perceived today are also outlined.

Storytelling – The Historical Perspective

Throughout history, storytelling has been the oldest form of communication and knowledge transmission. Since ancient times, people have felt the need to share experiences, explain the world, give meaning to things and phenomena, and create connections through stories. *Storytelling*, the English term equivalent to the Romanian "povestire," refers to the act of telling a story. Given its international acceptance, this term will be used throughout the present research. The concept of storytelling refers to the act of narrating aloud, using facial and bodily expressiveness, fulfilling multiple functions, among which are entertainment, the transmission of information, and education.

Arthur Ransome, in his attempt to illustrate the history of storytelling at the beginning of the 20th century, emphasizes that: *"At the beginning, there were no professional storytellers. But by the campfire, in desert tents and in huts at night, wherever common people gathered and shared the experiences of vigorous days, there was always someone whose stories were the most enjoyable to hear, whose deeds were the most wondrous, whose realistic details were the most varied."*

Storytelling at the National Level

In Romania, stories passed down from generation to generation have represented an essential form of preserving the wisdom, humor, and traditions of the people. Throughout centuries of survival under various dominations and subjugations, storytellers were those who managed to maintain the spirit of the community, even in the most difficult periods.

In traditional Romanian culture, the storyteller was an important and universal figure in every village. The role of the storyteller could be assumed by any man gifted with charismatic and captivating speech, having the ability to enchant an audience with anecdotes, tales, and jokes. *Șezătorile*—those community gatherings—represented a frequent setting for these storytelling sessions. During these gatherings, women carried out activities such as weaving and singing lullabies, but also storytelling. These moments were rich with folk legends, fairy tales, and traditional narratives, told by both men and women, but especially by the elders, who had the role of preserving and transmitting the community's history and teachings.

The term *basm* in Romanian narrative tradition is defined as "a narrative with fantastic elements, symbolizing the forces of good and evil in the struggle for and against human happiness."

CHAPTER II. The Performing Arts and Storytelling

Theatre in Society

In the second chapter, the art of storytelling is analyzed from a performative perspective, highlighting its theatrical dimension. In this context, reference is made to Richard Schechner's theory regarding the performing arts, under whose umbrella storytelling also fits due to the numerous common elements between the two fields.

Theatrical Elements in Storytelling

The second part of the chapter examines the theatrical elements integrated into storytelling, emphasizing its complexity as an artistic event. The final section presents the acting techniques used in the art of storytelling, with reference to methods developed by Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone, and Michael Chekhov.

- Text

- Space

- Costume

- Props

- Acting Techniques: Posture and Status of Characters, Movement, Voice, Gestures, Psychological Gesture of the Storyteller

Storytelling – A Performance

Defining storytelling as an art involves answering two fundamental questions: Is storytelling a form of art? And if so, does it fall within the realm of dramatic arts? Approaching these questions in reverse leads to the conclusion that storytelling is, by its nature, an action—and every action inherently contains a degree of dramatism. Moreover, storytelling is an art because it fulfills an aesthetic function. In this regard, Gérard Genette states that "a work of art is an intentional aesthetic object, an artifact or a product with an aesthetic function."

A storytelling performance, like any form of art, possesses the ability to transcend reality—both through the imaginary world the storyteller creates in front of the audience and through the emotional impact it generates. Genette compares this process to "a river overflowing its banks, which exerts an even greater force," thus highlighting the transformative power of narrative art. In storytelling, we observe the interaction between two complementary arts: the literary art, represented by the story's text, and the art of orality, defined by the artistic interpretation.

Keith Johnstone defines interpretive interaction as "a shift in balance between two people," and in storytelling, this balance manifests as direct and spontaneous communication with the audience. Unlike traditional theatre—where artistic expression is often governed by strict conventions—storytelling is characterized by flexibility and adaptability. One of its fundamental traits is the elimination of the fourth wall, allowing for a closer and more direct relationship between storyteller and spectators.

Theatrical Elements in Storytelling

The storyteller is not only the performer—the actor who enacts the story—but also the director, scenographer, and costumer of their own show. The artist is completely free, independent of any institutional constraints, yet fully responsible for all aspects related to the production and presentation of the storytelling performance before the audience.

The institutional aspect is mentioned because, generally, an actor depends on this context, both as an administrative structure and as a catalyst for all the syncretic elements of theater. In the case of storytelling, the audience embodies all these theatrical elements and provides the storyteller with immediate feedback. Through the interactivity and responses from the audience, the storyteller understands whether they have convinced the listeners, whether they were well-received, at what moments they connected with the audience and when they lost that connection, as well as how they managed to regain it. Additionally, the storyteller assesses whether the transmitted message was correctly decoded, whether they earned their fee, and most importantly, whether the audience will return to listen to their stories in the future. The audience's desire to hear

another story immediately after the current one concludes is clear evidence that all the storyteller's objectives have been achieved.

CHAPTER III. Storytelling in Education

The Educational Process – A General Perspective
The Psycho-Emotional Characteristics of Primary School Children

The third chapter analyzes the role of the art of storytelling in education. It begins with a general overview of the educational process, including classical, traditional, and modern teaching methods and structures. This framework allows for contextualizing storytelling as an effective educational method, highlighting its similarities with existing didactic strategies.

The second part addresses two concepts established in early 20th century Britain — *Drama in Education* (DIE) and *Theatre in Education* (TIE) — and analyzes how the art of storytelling fits within this paradigm.

The final part of the chapter presents examples of best practices regarding the use of storytelling in various schools worldwide. Furthermore, it highlights the diverse educational functionalities of storytelling and its essential contribution to the development of children's emotional intelligence.

The fundamental educational goal is the formation and development of the student through the transmission of a message of wisdom or a set of knowledge so that they can assimilate, transfer, and apply the acquired information in real contexts. Students need both cognitive and psycho-emotional acquisitions to shape their intellectual and personal development.

However, the educational process cannot be reduced merely to the transmission of content; the way in which this content is delivered and integrated into the learning experience is crucial. Interactive teaching methods offer numerous benefits, including increased student motivation, the development of social skills, adaptability to individual needs, and the improvement of critical thinking and creativity.

However, these methods also present significant challenges, such as difficulties in time management, the need for additional resources, challenges in applying them in large classrooms,

and the complexity of student assessment. This behavioral degradation process, resulting from the abusive use of the internet, has been observed in recent years even among children from preschool and primary school ages. Also referred to as Generation Z, this group represents the first generation of digital natives. Children today, even from preschool and primary school, are already born into an environment where smartphones are omnipresent. Continuous access to information, the diversity of online communities in which they are "integrated," and instant communication channels have contributed to forming a generation of children and young people who increasingly seek uniqueness through visible comparison with others. Therefore, a strong stimulation of emotional intelligence is necessary to help children break free from digital blockages and communicate genuinely with those around them. Storytelling primarily appeals to this intelligence, called EQ by Daniel Goleman.

Theatre in Education
Drama in Education (DIE) and Theatre in Education (TIE) in the Educational Process

In education, theatre and drama are distinct terms, used appropriately depending on the context. However, their goal in this field is common: to prepare the student to manage everyday situations or conflicts by adopting appropriate and balanced behavior, which will help them find solutions to various problems they face.

Theatre in Education, known as Theatre in Education (TIE), is a specific genre of theatre developed by private artist companies that design and perform itinerant theatrical productions aimed at students. This type of performance can include improvisational elements, varying degrees of audience interaction, forum theatre, debates on proposed themes, and other interactive methods. After World War II, theatrical initiatives with social impact emerged, promoted by independent troupes and companies. This educational method based on theatre developed as theatre creators began to move beyond the exclusively artistic sphere and focus on communities, addressing relevant social themes. Augusto Boal, in Brazil and later in Europe, as well as Bertolt Brecht in Germany—with significant impact across Europe—introduced innovative concepts such as forum theatre and social theatre. These theatrical forms aim at active audience involvement in the artistic

process, with the objectives of raising awareness, problematizing, and educating individuals, as well as encouraging a participatory attitude in the society to which they belong.

Regarding Theatre in Education, the working structure remains similar to that of professional theatres, with the ultimate goal being the performance itself. The terminology "Theatre in Education" (TIE) crystallized with the emergence of another method applying dramatic techniques in education, which shifted previous educational paradigms—namely Drama in Education (DIE).

Dorothy Heathcote was the first professional drama teacher to experiment with new forms of dramatic teaching in education, aimed at helping students to know themselves and discover "what they already know but do not yet know that they know." The Heathcote method, applied immediately after completing her university studies, focused on experimenting with and implementing drama in the personal development of students.

Somers' advocacy in *Drama in the Curriculum* focuses on understanding the important role of drama in the relationship between subjects and interactive teaching methods, as well as drama as a standalone subject within the school curriculum, which can culminate in a performance. In other words, the author approaches this art form within the educational context, both as *Drama in Education* (DIE) and *Theatre in Education* (TIE). In any subject, a purely theoretical method of teaching knowledge tends to keep the content at an abstract level and, consequently, distant from the student, whereas dramatic art offers the opportunity to learn through the lived experience of the same knowledge. Motor skills and emotions experienced during this process contribute to much faster and more comprehensive retention of information.

Storytelling in the Educational Process

Storytelling has begun to gain interest in European schools and beyond, as a natural extension of the applicability of theatre in education, as previously mentioned. Currently, numerous studies have been conducted on groups of students, focusing on the development of psycho-emotional competencies, especially emotional intelligence (EQ), through the use of oral stories. The applicability of storytelling occurs bidirectionally: initially from teacher to student as an initial

offering, and subsequently from the student to the teacher and peer group as a positive response, naturally and non-invasively elicited by the teacher.

A relevant example of applying storytelling in child development is the project initiated by Špela Ferlič, a storyteller, author of storybooks, and folklorist. Since 2015, she has initiated and coordinated a storytelling project within the Literature House, a non-governmental organization in Ljubljana, Slovenia. This project, developed in collaboration with a team of educators, aims to promote the art of storytelling among children through interactive educational experiences, in partnership with schools. An innovative aspect of this initiative is the creation of a dedicated storytelling space designed as a performance stage, equipped with lighting and infrastructure specific to the theatrical field, called the *Fairytale Studio*. This environment offers children the opportunity to experience the narrative act in a professional setting, thus familiarizing them with oral and performative expression techniques.

CHAPTER IV. The "Grow Through Stories" Method

In the fourth chapter, the "Grow Through Stories" method is presented. The first part details the educational-cultural program based on this method, explaining the framework in which it is conducted: a set of 10 workshops held monthly throughout a school year, in second-grade classes from three schools in Arad County, selected for research. The "Grow Through Stories" teaching-learning-assessment method is active and participatory. As a means to achieve specific objectives, it aims to develop in students the capacity for independent thinking, better self-awareness, and the ability to understand and retain messages more easily and over a longer period, since these are delivered alongside emotions.

In the subject of Personal Development, through the "Grow Through Stories" method, students develop, by engaging in games, the general competencies outlined in the national curriculum: demonstrating interest in self-knowledge, a positive attitude towards themselves and others, and the appropriate expression of emotions in interactions with familiar children and adults. Moreover, students accumulate and consolidate information and experiences through storytelling, while the teacher evaluates the level of information retention through games and assignments.

The Educational-Cultural Program Based on the "Grow Through Stories" Method The educational-cultural program based on the "Grow Through Stories" method was conducted during the 2022-2023 school year, comprising 10 workshops held once a month (September to June) in three second-grade classes in schools from Arad County. The workshop structure based on the "Grow Through Stories" method consists of seven stages as follows:

1. Conquest

2. Energizing

3. Takeoff

4. Flight into Imagination

5. Landing in Reality

6. Transfer

7. Action and Enthusiasm

The Structure of the Story in the "Grow Through Stories" Method The second part of the chapter is dedicated to analyzing the structure of the stories performed, considering that the essence of the method lies in the story itself and the ways it is interpreted through the use of the acting techniques previously mentioned.

Interpretation Techniques / Structure of the Workshops Based on the "Grow Through Stories" Method

The third part presents the structure of the workshops, describing each lesson and workshop in detail. The stages of the method are highlighted, including introductory games, preparatory exercises, activities designed to create the story's atmosphere, the moment of oral storytelling, followed by improvisation games aimed at consolidating the information, and finally, the homework assignment.

Development of Self-Awareness and Empathy Skills through the "Grow Through Stories" Method – Research Results

The fourth part of the chapter is dedicated to the general analysis of the workshops, and the final section presents the research results, evaluating the development of empathy and self-awareness through observation sheets. Specific indicators were tracked, and the conclusions are illustrated by graphs showing the evolution of these skills throughout the workshops.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the "Grow Through Stories" method has a clear and highly beneficial impact on students' emotional development by improving self-awareness and empathy competencies. These two skills represent fundamental dimensions of emotional intelligence. A person demonstrates a high level of emotional intelligence to the extent that they understand and control their own feelings and manage to relate appropriately to others.

The art of storytelling constitutes a subtle, playful, and engaging method for cultivating these socio-emotional competencies, making the integration of storytelling into the teaching process not only an opportunity but also a necessity.

Finally, directions for future development are proposed, emphasizing the method's potential to be replicated and adapted to other lessons and subjects due to its proven functionality. In this context, the intention to develop a manual or a guide of good practices for teachers has been expressed, providing them with a useful tool in the educational process. The goal of this initiative is to support teachers not only in improving teaching methods and increasing student performance but also in facilitating a psycho-emotional connection with students. Thus, through the experiences lived and emotions generated during the lessons, students will be able to assimilate information more easily and apply it in their daily lives.

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