

Lights, Camera, Drama!

Priyadakshini d/o Surendiran S, Punggol Primary School

Miss Priya wanted to set up her school's first Drama Club. Without formal training in theatre, or a budget for an instructor, she pushed on with what she did have – a determination to bring the stage to her students.

Teachers are usually alarmed to see their students cry. But in May 2014, I cried along with the 32 young members of our “Drama Family”. These were tears of joy – not for the victory we had just achieved, but for the journey that had led us there.

When I first started teaching in Punggol Primary School, there was no Drama-related Co-Curricular Activity (CCA) in the school. Even though I was still finding my feet and getting to know the school and staff, I decided to approach my mentor, Ms Ling, a Senior Teacher, whose enthusiasm and support gave me the confidence and courage to approach my Head of Department (HOD) about starting a language-based club for lower primary students. After listening to my goals and intended objectives, she told me to prepare a proposal and CCA plan. That quiet vote of confidence, to know that my colleagues believed in me and supported me, even though I was a beginning teacher, taught me an important lesson – we will never know what we can or cannot do until we try and the sky is the limit. That has been my guiding principle ever since and something I believe I have passed on to my students.

In 2009, the ‘Book and Drama Club’ was born. Armed with my lesson plans, a multitude of resources and twenty eager students, the club began in earnest. Despite not having a budget for an instructor, I was never disheartened. Rather, I regarded it as a brilliant opportunity to hone my skills as a Drama and English Language teacher.

That year, we entered the ‘World As One!’ Competition which had been organised in commemoration of Racial Harmony Day, and emerged as one of the top six finalists, finally earning a merit award and a chance to perform for the President of Singapore. That was when I realised just what passion and dedication could do, particularly for children, because I saw how tirelessly they rehearsed, memorised their lines and learnt the songs, just because they felt the love for Drama and enjoyed performing. It was a team effort and I felt truly blessed to be supported by so many willing and able hands. When I saw my little group of eight year olds acting, singing and dancing with confidence in front of an audience, I knew then that nothing could possibly give me greater satisfaction than helping my students to realise their dreams and showing them that they could do anything that they put their heart to.

As my pioneer batch of students progressed through the school, so did my CCA. I was placed in charge of the Drama section of the club and began attending Drama courses and reading as many articles and books as I could find on Drama and

various techniques for primary school students. I might not have been a trained Drama teacher or professional, but I believe it was my willingness and enthusiasm to try out new Drama games and strategies that 'infected' my students with a similar passion. It grew to be more than just a club, and soon we started calling each other our 'Drama Family'. The students who started off being too shy or frightened to make a mistake during improvisation games like 'bus stop' became the first ones to raise their hands as they were eager to get the ball rolling. That confidence did not grow overnight; it was a gradual process as a result of the safe learning environment that enclosed every Drama session. Mistakes were part and parcel of our sessions and I watched their expressions change from a wince or grimace to the ability to laugh at themselves as they learnt.

From endless rehearsals for performances and competitions, to heart-to-heart talks and reflections before every session ended, we forged close ties and I could see my students learning beyond Drama skills and techniques. And their teacher was learning, too. My 'Family' taught me that experience is a brilliant teacher and that every challenge or setback we face would better prepare us for the future. I have seen my students recover seamlessly from wardrobe mishaps on stage and make improvisations when their friends forgot their lines. Many of their recoveries have left me in awe of their spontaneity and quick-thinking.

We have been participating in the Shell Singapore Youth Science Festival (SSYSF) STAGE! Competition since 2011. It is an annual Science Drama competition for primary schools and every year, we would enter with an original script that I had written and props and costumes that my supportive colleagues had helped create. For the first four years, our school made it to the grand finals. It gave me an excellent opportunity to teach my students about showmanship and sportsmanship and how they should treasure the wealth of memories and experiences they were receiving, rather than looking at the prizes as an end goal. Not once did they sulk or show tears of disappointment when they did not win. Rather, they cheered as loudly as they could regardless of what award they won and also expressed genuine appreciation for other schools' performances. For them, it was not about winning; it was about the experience.

2014 was the first and only time I saw my students shed tears. Tears of joy. We finally made it to the top three of the SSYSF finals that year. They were emotional as they realised just how much this meant to them, after all the effort they had put into their performances. When they were eventually announced as the winners, they ran up on stage jubilantly to collect their trophy and accolades, I held back. After all, this was their moment of glory. It only took them a split second to realise that I was not up on stage with them. Before the emcee could speak, they interrupted her to insist that I joined them on stage, in their moment of triumph. To hear them say, "Miss Priya, come on up! We would not have gotten this far without you!" and see 30 pairs of hands gesturing to me with their eyes shining with every possible emotion, was all I needed. I did not need a trophy or any formal award to realise that this was a

success beyond others. I had won a place in their hearts and made an impact on their lives. What more could I ask for? To know that they attributed their success to my guidance and thanked me for being the 'head' of our little 'Drama Family' meant the world to me.

Drama is but one facet of what I enjoy doing as a teacher. But it encompasses so much of what I stand for as an educator – character building, motivation, and bonding.

I have had plenty of Drama in my teaching life, and I am happy for it to stay that way.