

Educational School Theater Activities in the Preparatory Stage: An Analytical Reading in Light of the Official Algerian Curricula

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Abstract:

This study aimed to identify the content of educational school theater activities in the preparatory education curriculum and their importance for learners. The preparatory education is structured with methodological objectives that allow for the gradual construction of knowledge and concepts in children, enabling their intellectual and scientific advancement. It also fosters their gradual independence in solving both school-related and everyday life problems.

Relying on educational theater activities through acting, play, and storytelling undoubtedly enhances the educational process for preparatory education children. This is essential to meet the needs of this critical stage in a child's life and subsequent developmental phases. These theatrical activities bring joy and enthusiasm to learners, fostering their willingness to participate in group work as both performers and spectators. Moreover, they help children develop confidence in public speaking and confrontation, which are key elements of strength, resilience, and self-confidence. All these aspects constitute social necessities within the educational function of school theater.

This research paper seeks to explore these issues and others through theatrical activation strategies for preparatory education children in Algerian schools, based on the content of official documents from the Ministry of National Education.

Keywords: Content; Theater; Educational School; Curriculum; Preparatory Education.

INTRODUCTION

The education of children is one of the oldest activities undertaken by individuals and societies. However, the prevailing conditions in each society determine the mode of education. Societies have always strived to shape individuals and prepare them to serve collective interests and achieve desired goals. Psychologists, educators, and sociologists agree on the necessity of focusing on childhood through theatrical activities, as a child's cognitive abilities do not develop suddenly upon entering school. Instead, cognitive growth progresses toward maturity and development, beginning with the prenatal stage, followed by early childhood, and continuing through later phases. Therefore, educators emphasize the importance of providing children with diverse educational activities before they reach the school stage. Numerous studies and research have confirmed the critical role of theater activities in fostering a child's personality and psychological balance in subsequent developmental stages.

This perspective has been supported by many educators and philosophers, starting with Plato, who emphasized the necessity of identifying children's innate abilities and guiding them accordingly toward suitable fields. Rousseau highlighted the significance of personal experiences, asserting that they shape an individual's character and can either nurture or hinder their natural virtue and nobility. He believed that childhood experiences play a crucial role in forming personality in later life stages (Awad, 1999, p. 12). Meanwhile, John Dewey, who founded the experimental school at the University of Chicago with his wife, advocated for the importance of direct experience in children's education. According to Dewey, true education is only achieved through experiences that engage a child's activity and initiative. He called for liberating learners from external pressures, constraints, and control at any stage of their education (Badran, 2000, p. 22). Dewey also stressed the need for extensive teacher training to understand children's tendencies and interests while transforming the educational environment into a laboratory where children engage in various activities.

Similarly, Ibn Khaldun paid great attention to educational methodologies for child upbringing, emphasizing the need for these methods to be based on sound psychological foundations. He insisted that early childhood education should be deeply ingrained and advocated for the use of sensory-based examples in instruction. Ibn Khaldun also stressed the importance of role models in child upbringing, arguing that children learn more through imitation and observation than through direct advice and guidance.

Currently, there is a global interest in theater, acting, and play activities in childhood education. This interest is evident in various studies and research in child psychology and educational programs tailored to childhood development. The modern approach to child-rearing incorporates educational theater activities as a fundamental tool for developing a generation capable of adapting to contemporary changes. These theatrical activities aim to foster holistic child development, adequately preparing children for future life stages by shaping their behavior, instilling positive habits, and correcting misconceptions that might have originated from family upbringing. Additionally, they help children develop essential social skills, including manners, recreation, emotional expression, and adaptability to different social environments.

Thus, this study presents an analytical reading of the content of educational theater activities in the preparatory education curriculum and highlights their significance in a learner's life. The research problem can be formulated through the following questions:

- What are the key requirements for preparatory education activities according to Algeria's official documents?
- How are theater and acting activities incorporated into the preparatory education stage?
- What are the educational fundamentals of theater activities in preparatory education according to the content of official documents?

Accordingly, this study aims to:

- Identify the key requirements for preparatory education activities based on Algeria's official documents.
- Examine how theater and acting activities are integrated into preparatory education.
- Clarify the teaching methods of theater activities in preparatory education according to the official documents.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of an important topic related to the role of theater and acting in early education—an essential foundation for future educational stages.

1. The Nature of Preparatory Education and Its Requirements

1.1 Definition of Preparatory Education

Preparatory education encompasses the various learning experiences children receive before enrolling in school. It varies from one country to another in terms of curricula and the age group it targets. For example, in Scandinavian countries, it includes children aged 03 to 07 years, while in most European countries, it covers the age group 03 to 06 years, and in Britain, it extends to children aged 03 to 05 years (Peterson, 1996, p. 29).

Preparatory education plays a crucial role in shaping children's educational journey from the earliest stages of learning. The concept of kindergartens began to spread across Europe and America after the first kindergarten was established in 1837 by the German educator Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel (1782–1852) (Malaka, 2000, p. 16).

Preparatory education is designed for children who have not yet reached the mandatory school enrollment age. It allows them to develop their potential and provides them with opportunities for success in both school and life.

Preparatory education has a significant role in children's socialization, ensuring balanced growth and personality development. It prepares them for formal schooling by shaping the foundational aspects of their personality, building attitudes, forming initial self-perceptions, and acquiring essential skills, particularly sensory-motor abilities. It also trains them in independence and introduces them to their environment and others (Qatami, 2001, p. 13).

Preparatory education aims to equip children with a set of foundational abilities that serve as a solid and essential base for acquiring future skills necessary for school learning. In this sense, the preparatory year acts as a bridge that facilitates the smooth transition of children from the pre-school stage to formal education (Ali, 2007, p. 03).

1.2 Objectives of Preparatory Education

The objectives of preparatory education were defined by National Education Guidance Law No. 08/04, dated 23/01/2008, in Article 38, which states: "Preparatory education is the final stage of pre-school education, preparing children aged 05 to 06 years for entry into primary education" (Ministry of National Education, 2008, p. 74).

Furthermore, Article 39 specifies that preparatory education aims particularly to:

- Encourage the development of children's personalities through educational play activities.
- Raise their awareness of their physical being, especially by helping them acquire sensory and motor skills through play.
- Instill good habits by training them in communal life.
- Enhance their language practice through communication situations derived from proposed activities and play.
- Introduce them to the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic through engaging activities and appropriate games.

1.3 The Space of the Preparatory Education Classroom and Its Organizational Measures

According to Ministerial Circular No. 31/032/2008, dated April 20, 2008, regarding the organization of the preparatory education classroom space, which defines the most important

forms of organizing the preparatory education classroom space and calls for organization through grouping and educational workshops, this organizational model of the preparatory classroom space is based, on one hand, on forming small groups of children, either by using shared tables (circular, rectangular, or square, depending on available resources) or by joining individual desks or two-person desks to form larger group tables of various sizes for children to use in carrying out different group activities.

On the other hand, it is based on preparing educational workshops set up by the teacher in the form of distinct and separate corners and spaces, organized pedagogically and characterized by a structured layout according to the various activities targeted by the curriculum, allowing children to move from one corner to another to switch activities.

Among the most important characteristics of this organizational model:

- Children may or may not engage in the same educational activity at the same time.
- Group activities foster a spirit of cooperation and competition.
- Strengthening social interaction among children.
- Freedom of movement within the classroom space.
- Variety of educational materials depending on the different corners.

These corners are merely suggested educational spaces that the teacher can adapt according to the requirements of pedagogical projects, children's interests and concerns, and the intended educational objectives.

As for the proposed corners supporting this model, they are as follows:

- Gathering space.
- Educational games corner.
- Drawing and painting corner.
- Theater and puppet corner.
- Science and technology workshop.

1.4 The Preparatory Education Curriculum and Its Implementation Requirements:

The Ministry of National Education has given special attention to developing a curriculum for this stage to ensure qualitative care for early childhood in various specialized preparatory education spaces. This is achieved by fostering competencies and preparing appropriate tools and work means to meet the real needs of children and their developmental requirements (Ministry of National Education, Algeria, 2008: 3).

This curriculum has demonstrated that preparatory education is no longer merely a social and compensatory demand but has also become, above all, an educational and psychological necessity. This development aligns with findings from educational psychology research, which indicate that the developmental stage between the ages of four and six is a critical period in the formation and evolution of a child's personality. During this phase, the foundational aspects of personality are established, and there are significant learning potentials if effectively and purposefully utilized—especially through play activities that dominate the child's life at this stage. The child plays while simultaneously learning and growing. In other words, this stage represents the starting point for the child's cultural and cognitive formation (Ministry of National Education, Algeria, 2008: 3).

The curriculum also pointed out that comparative research findings indicate that children who have benefited from preparatory education services develop and grow faster, both qualitatively and quantitatively, compared to those who have not attended preparatory education. This difference is evident in cognitive abilities, communication, interaction with others, and emotional stability (Ministry of National Education, Algeria, 2008: 4).

Moreover, these same research findings have shown that enrolling in preparatory education enables children to adapt better to classroom activities, especially in fundamental learning tools (Ahmed, 2010, p. 131).

Implementers of this curriculum have been instructed to focus on the processes of learning and development rather than solely on educational outcomes. In terms of learning, the child should be an active and engaged discoverer, constructing their knowledge rather than passively receiving information. Regarding personality development, methods should be adopted that allow children to move, change, and think freely and spontaneously without pressure, in order to cultivate positive attitudes toward responsibility, self-reliance, self-confidence, perseverance, and initiative. Additionally, mental processes such as reasoning, analysis, synthesis, and judgment should be stimulated through activities involving classification, sequencing, and comparison (Ministry of National Education, Algeria, 2008: 3).

In constructing the preparatory education curriculum the competency-based approach was adopted, as is the case with other educational curricula. The preparatory education curriculum also referred to the expected profile of a child completing preparatory education by the end of the year (Al-Saleh, 2002, p. 68). The term "profile" refers to a set of competencies acquired by the child through various learning situations and activities across different fields. This profile is achieved through the following aspects (Ministry of National Education, Algeria, 2008: 6-7):

Sensory-Motor Aspect:

- The child adjusts their activities according to the nature of situations.
- The child performs gross and fine motor activities (both general and specific) with coordination, accuracy, and flexibility.
- The child situates themselves in time and space based on personal reference points.
- The child recognizes their physical abilities and sensory-motor limits.

Socio-Emotional Aspect:

- The child discovers their self and individuality.
- The child shares feelings and emotions with others.
- The child demonstrates independence through games, activities, and daily life inside and outside the classroom.
- The child uses appropriate means to respond to their needs, inclinations, desires, and interests.

Linguistic Aspect:

- The child speaks and communicates correctly.
- The child explores and inquiries about the meanings and implications of words.
- The child utilizes a vocabulary range between 2,500 and 3,000 words.
- The child constructs meaningful nominal and verbal sentences, moving beyond single-word expressions to complete sentences.

Cognitive-Knowledge Aspect (Khaled, 2004, p. 102):

- The child expresses interest and curiosity about the components of the social, physical, biological, technological, and economic environment.
- The child applies their thinking across various domains by exploring, practicing, using information, employing critical judgment, and solving problems.
- The child utilizes creative thinking.
- The child lays the foundation for conceptual understanding, including time, space, quantity, measurement, volume, weight, shape, area, color, material, aesthetics, balance, and sound.

The curriculum also emphasized the importance of diversifying approaches and strategies when designing and implementing learning situations by educators, as children vary

in their learning approaches toward the same educational situation (Ministry of National Education, Algeria, 2008: 11). Additionally, the curriculum highlighted a crucial element in a child's life: play, which is described as "the child's real world and a vital activity that fulfills their basic needs, balances their social, cognitive, emotional, and motor functions, and enables them to reach the highest levels of maturity".

Thus, play is a necessary strategy for developing a child's personality, requiring its integration with learning. Play plays a fundamental role in (Sharif, 2001, p. 32):

- Developing all aspects of a child's growth.
- Enhancing creative and social functions.
- Reinforcing experiences, knowledge, and cultural and social acquisitions.
- Building the child's personality and preparing them to achieve the goals of preparatory education.

Play is classified into the following:

- Repetitive Play: The child explores and examines the play situation, allowing them to interact with objects without focusing too much attention on them. Its core characteristic is the repetitive nature of movement.

- Imitative Play: The child mimics activities and situations, giving meaning to their movements and actions. Its main feature is that the child uses play to imitate people or reenact events.

- Constructive and Creative Play: The child constructs something meaningful using seemingly insignificant objects, such as modeling clay or building blocks. This type of play peaks around the age of five.

- Grouping Play (also called Environmental Representation Play): The child gathers toys that resemble real-world objects, organizing them either according to reality or in an imaginative way. Its essential characteristic is the selection and organization of ready-made toys.

The preparatory education stage is fundamentally a stage of play, making it essential to respect this natural need of the child. Play fosters language development, intelligence, cognitive abilities, and personal growth. A child needs stimulating tools that nurture creativity and instill a spirit of initiative in a free, pressure-free environment. Play is a means of utilizing intelligence, constructing ideas, language, and imagination. It provides the child with an opportunity for self-expression and the confidence to communicate.

In addition to play, other activities such as acting and role-playing story characters contribute to enhancing the learner's abilities.

2. Theater and Acting Activities in Preparatory Education:

During theater and acting activities, the child expresses, experiments, builds knowledge, structures thoughts, shapes their worldview, achieves self-fulfillment, interacts with others, solves problems, and develops imagination and creativity. It is essential to organize the factors of space and time based on the principle that theater nurtures, educates, and heals. Theater nurtures: language, intelligence, cognitive ability, and personality. Theater educates: for adaptation, as a way to utilize intelligence, a field for experimentation, and a tool for structuring thought, language, and imagination. Play heals: by providing the child with the opportunity to unleash their potential, which in turn grants them the courage to think, speak, and express their true self.

Another activity closely related to theater and acting is role-playing and imitation, which is "the most common genre of children's literature" (Slim, 2000, p. 165). It captivates the child, encourages attentiveness, and increases their linguistic repertoire naturally. It serves as a source of stimulation for preparatory education children, aligning with their interests and fulfilling their needs. They are always eager to listen, identifying with the characters, living through their events, and being influenced by their content. Through storytelling, ideas and experiences are

conveyed in a lively, expressive, engaging, and captivating manner. Additionally, it enriches vocabulary, fosters a love for reading, and provides exposure to correct linguistic structures. Stories of various types carry linguistic, scientific, social, religious, or cultural content and play a vital role in the development of the child's personality (Algerian Ministry of National Education, 2009, p. 15).

In addition to the linguistic objectives of role-playing and acting, which include:

- Enriching the child's vocabulary.
- Training in the use of various linguistic patterns, expressions, and structures.
- Developing listening skills.

There are other important objectives, including:

- Providing entertainment and psychological enjoyment through the play's theme.
- Enhancing various cognitive processes.
- Instilling desirable values and attitudes.
- Stimulating imagination and encouraging role-playing.
- Freely expressing emotions and feelings.

3. Types of Theater and Acting Activities in Preparatory Education:

Theater and acting activities are divided into two types: imaginative and realistic, covering the following themes:

In the imaginative type, we find:

- **Animal stories:** Children easily become attached to the characters in these stories, love them, and are drawn to them. This is due to the ease and enjoyment they experience in embodying animal roles. These stories also provide children with the opportunity to practice imagination and thinking effortlessly, as their events are simple and their language is easy to grasp.

- **Stories about the universe and nature:** Through these stories, the child learns about the universe, natural beings, and related vocabulary. They help bring the child closer to reality by immersing them in the struggle between good and evil and gradually transitioning from a limited world to a vast, boundless one. Thus, objective knowledge is acquired through imaginative events and ideas while interacting with the surrounding world.

In the realistic type, topics are drawn from real-life situations that reflect the child's environment. This type of story highlights the child's cognitive and social growth by adding realistic value to phenomena and events connected to their life. It also equips the child with intellectual and methodological tools to solve problems encountered in various aspects of life.

The language activity workbook presents five selected stories based on their educational, linguistic, and practical value, aiming to develop various competencies. The stories are introduced progressively, with each task requiring a specific level of abilities and skills.

To successfully achieve the story's objectives, several conditions must be met, including:

- Choosing an appropriate setting that ensures attention and listening.
- Providing a comfortable seating arrangement that allows everyone to see and hear the educator.
- Narrating the story in an engaging manner.
- Ensuring that the educator's voice is audible and expressive of different emotions (joy, sadness, fear, courage, etc.).
- Using gestures to portray the characters' roles without disrupting the story's content.

The following table outlines what the child should do at different stages of engaging with the story (Algerian Ministry of National Education, 2009, p. 17).

Table 01: Table of Children's Activities and Required Stories

Exercise Number	Story Title	Child's Activity
16-17	The Ant and the Grasshopper	Listening to the story / Narrating the story events.
		Describing story scenes / Arranging story events.
28-29	The Sun and the Wind	Listening to the story / Narrating the story events.
		Describing story scenes / Visualizing the story scenes and representing them through drawing.
46-47	The Hen and the Grain of Wheat	Listening to the story / Narrating the story events.
		Describing story scenes / Retelling the story in one's own words.
58-59	The Donkey and the Wolf	Listening to the story / Narrating the story events.
		Expressing thoughts about the story scenes / Identifying words from the text.

Source: First-Grade Language and Scientific Activities Workbook for Preparatory Education.

From this, it is clear that theater activities help the child express thoughts, emotions, and feelings, nurture imagination and creativity, develop social tendencies, and enhance readiness for relationships and understanding of the surrounding world. This aligns with the targeted phase competencies outlined in the curriculum:

- The child communicates with others through speech, movement, and body language.
- The child performs various roles.
- The child participates in theatrical play.
- The child contributes to preparing a theatrical performance.

4. Examples of Teaching the Theater Activity in Preparatory:

It can be explained as follows:

We find acting, role-playing, and character embodiment.

Example (Social Story):

- Competencies: Role-playing in social situations, appreciating effort, respecting others.
- Topic: The restaurant.
- Competency Indicator: Linguistic skills and role-playing.
- Materials: Tables - chairs - toy plates - dining utensils - kitchen containers - head covering - money...
- Situation Progression:
 - Children wear appropriate clothing.
 - Children set up tables and chairs.
 - They play the role of the host.
 - Two children are assigned the role of dishwashers.
 - One child is assigned as the cashier and has a money box.
 - Various types of food suitable to the traditions and customs of society are provided.
 - Children are allowed to enter the restaurant in multiple scenes, dressed in evening attire and having dinner.
 - Others may organize parking in front of the restaurant.
 - Hosts arrange the tables.
 - Those who do not want to play roles are assigned to decorate the restaurant.

– After finishing, children rearrange the hall under the supervision of the teacher. Various activities can be introduced (birthday - wedding...).

Table 02: Proposed Plan for Theater Activity in Preschool

Stages	Educational Goals	Educational/Scientific Activities	Assessment
Sensory-Motor Introduction	Ability to name fruits and vegetables and classify them.	Naming and identifying different fruits and vegetables.	Diagnostic:
		Why do we call them by these names?	Addressing prior misconceptions.
Building Learning	Ability to prepare the store.	Children prepare a store selling fruits and vegetables.	Formative:
	Ability to act out roles.	They use Arabic names and describe the vegetables and fruits they are selling.	Correcting and refining Arabic pronunciation for all children.
		They weigh the produce and give prices.	Ensuring the correct use of linguistic and social structures.
		Some children play the role of customers, while others are storekeepers waiting for their turn.	Emphasizing understanding and applying concepts.
			Encouraging respect for public order.
Investment Phase	Engaging other children in role-playing.	Assigning roles to other children.	Final:
	Ability to apply learned concepts in other situations.	Possibility of playing the role of a storyteller.	Ensuring respect for others. Enhancing language skills and roleplaying.

Source: From the notes of the preschool teacher at Ahmed Ibn Rushd School, 2015.

Table 03: Examples of Plays in Preschool Education

Play: The Pillars of Islam	Play: The National Flag
Narrator: Reading the hadith: "Islam is built upon five..." – a noble hadith.	The flag introduces itself
First student: I am the two testimonies (Shahada); I am the first pillar of Islam. I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is His messenger.	First student: I am the flag, the symbol of the nation. I am the one that stands upright every morning and evening.
Second student: I am prayer; I am the pillar of religion. I am the one who brings satisfaction to my Lord when the servant prays.	Second student: The colors of my flag are three: red, white, and green.

Narrator: What is fasting?	Third student: I am the red color; I represent the blood of the martyrs.
Third student: I am zakat, the prescribed charity in the Qur'an. I am the one who brings smiles to the poor.	Fourth student: I am the green color; I am the green leaf in the middle of my flag.
Narrator: What is Hajj?	Fifth student: I am the white color; I symbolize peace and Islam, my religion and identity.
Fourth student: I am fasting; I am the one who forbids food and drink from dawn until sunset.	Sixth student: I am the crescent; I am the symbol of Islamic history.
Fifth student: I am Hajj, the symbol that rises above the minarets.	Seventh student: I am the star; I am the emblem that flies at the highest altitudes.
Sixth student: I am faith; I am the foundation. I am the one upon which the five pillars of Islam stand.	Eighth student: I am unity and national cohesion; I am the spirit of struggle and the revolution.
Everyone: We are the pillars of Islam	The flag's biography:
	All: We are the flag of Algeria; we are the national symbol. We carry the flag, and the national anthem resonates from the crowd.

Source: Preschool Language and Scientific Activity Guide.

5. Practical Educational Guidelines for Theater and Acting Activities

The following guidelines should be considered when presenting theater and acting activities:

- Providing opportunities for verbal and physical expression and encouraging them.
- Supporting character embodiment.
- Ensuring the safety and appropriateness of materials.
- Encouraging creativity and allowing room for initiative.
- Adopting purposeful and constructive plays and theatrical performances.

Theater is an essential activity in preparatory education due to its significant educational value. It fosters the development of a child's creative imagination and aims to help children express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

The teacher presents a theatrical text, and the child listens and then repeats the text either partially or entirely. The child engages with the text, mimics the voices of people, animals, and objects, and imitates them through movement using facial and body expressions.

Children should take on different roles, remember them, and explore theatrical play by performing roles spontaneously or under guidance. They should accept their roles as actors or audience members and fulfill their responsibilities accordingly.

To achieve the intended objectives of this activity, various types of theatrical play should be utilized:

- Dramatic Play: Children act out roles of their choice after listening to a story.
- Puppet Theater: Children perform one or more roles using glove puppets behind a curtain. Here, the teacher encourages children's initiatives by involving them in decoration.

Additionally, the following aspects should be emphasized:

- Accepting stories brought by children to encourage spontaneous speech.
- Involving children in choosing costumes and acting.
- Accepting gestures and movements chosen by the child.
- Allowing children to select the rhythm that accompanies the performance.

CONCLUSION

In light of the study's objectives and through an analytical reading of the official documents related to preparatory education in Algeria, the following conclusions were reached:

– Official preparatory education curricula place great emphasis on theater and acting activities due to their significant role in fostering children's development and education.

– Theater and acting activities in preparatory education are presented through both imaginative and realistic perspectives, incorporating various forms of play and storytelling.

– Teaching theater activities in preparatory education requires both pedagogical expertise and facilitation skills to stimulate children's imagination and engagement.

Raising awareness among educators, specialists, and education officials about the importance of school theater and its pedagogical implications fosters a global perspective that strongly advocates for integrating educational theater activities—through acting, play, and storytelling—into preparatory education. This perspective aligns with modern educational approaches, breaking rigidity and stagnation while promoting change, innovation, and creativity to help educational institutions achieve their objectives.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

– Actively involving teachers and education professionals in the evaluation and development of curricula, particularly those related to pre-school education.

– Training preparatory education teachers in modern teaching models, specifically using theatrical acting strategies, dramatic play strategies, and story-based theater strategies to enhance children's learning experiences.

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