



Human writes Mangai Balasegaram

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Kids need drama in their lives

Theatre in schools may help us shift from robotic, factory workers into animated, alive performers.

I HAVE two nieces currently preparing for university and then employment. I wonder about their future. Tomorrow's job market is going to be very different due to the "robot revolution".

Consider this: By 2030, 800 million global jobs will be lost to automation, according to a McKinsey Global Institute report last year on 46 nations. That's a fifth of the global workforce gone in a decade. Shocking, isn't it?

The report predicts a huge transition of the job market, of the size seen a century ago in the big shift from farming to factory work.

Are we preparing for this? Bluntly, no. Education systems are still stuck in the industrial age, teaching "yesterday's skills to tomorrow's graduates".

Schools enforce rote learning, standardisation and tests, and make children do – in the words of British educationist Sir Ken Robinson – "low-grade clerical work". To get the best from children, he says, we need a "broad curriculum" that sparks their curiosity, and allows creativity and divergent thinking.

In the future job market, not only do STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and maths) count, so too do "soft skills", such as "people skills", communication and problem-solving.

One subject that helps build such skills is drama. Drama has long been a key form of human expression having significant societal impact (bolstering religion and myth) and profound cultural influence (consider William Shakespeare, Greek tragedies, Hollywood and wayang kulit). Yet it is often

the least important subject in schools, with little standing.

Ironically, even in the home of Shakespeare, whose plays entertained and enlightened uneducated masses, schools often dissect his works in English lessons but don't perform his plays.

Drama teacher Amina Jindani recalls how she had to constantly justify her existence when she first started teaching drama in a Kuala Lumpur school in the 1990s. She shied away from overtly calling it a drama class, but instead talked about a class to help build confidence, communicate effectively or serve as a memory aid. Nowadays, the value of drama is increasingly realised, especially in international schools.

Drama, she says, can be a valuable tool for learning. "It can be interlinked and crossed with every subject in school." She is currently working with an international school to build a syllabus that uses drama in all subjects.

"When you incorporate movement, interaction and voice into something you're learning, the memory lasts far longer" compared with learning while sitting in class, she says.

"You remember when your whole body was involved, when you did a dance or a sports event... When you do it, feel it and

be it, then you learn it. It's holistic."

A geography topic on trade, ports and migration at this school was brought to life through drama.

Amina points out that children learn differently. Some learn best through visuals; others prefer auditory (listening) or kinaesthetic (movement) methods. Primary school-children, especially boys, are often mostly kinaesthetic learners, enjoying hands-on activities.

Lesson plans should take this into account. "Teachers just doing 'chalk and talk' are only engaging auditory learners," she says, adding that she has "always found a lack of kinaesthetic learning" in schools – something drama could help offset.

Drama also has its use in self-expression, particularly of the parts of personality rarely expressed. "If every child got to role play at least once a week and act out some form of imaginative fantasy, there would be much less psychological disturbance," she says.

The role of drama as a psychological aid was recognised here previously in the healing ritual called "Main Puteri", where a missing part of the psyche is acted out.

Amina uses drama as therapy in her company, MoOne Drama Academy. Drama is also used for

self-empowerment, thinking outside the box, team-building and improving relationships in her clients' companies. Her core work is in drama education, though, and she still works with the drama club in SK Bukit Damansara.

The effect that drama can have on the self-development of children can be, literally, dramatic. Norlin Wan Musa watched the confidence of her two children grow significantly. Her son lost his awkwardness in movement and around his breaking voice after doing musical theatre at the British Academy of Performing Arts. I was personally struck by a video of him performing with such confidence and style for a 12-year-old.

"I feel drama complements what we already teach our kids at home – to express themselves freely," says Norlin.

Drama also helped her children become more aware of their surroundings, including issues affecting the country and the world, she adds.

Local schools, she says, have yet to evolve, and are "stuck with a curriculum that doesn't prepare students" with the skillsets necessary for today and the future. "I wish this subject was given prominence and taught in schools."

Theatre in schools may help us shift from robotic, factory workers into animated, alive performers. And it's also just fun.

Mangai Balasegaram writes mostly on health, but also delves into anything on being human. She has worked with international public health bodies and has a Masters in public health. Write to her at star2@thestar.com.my.

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