

Gender Roles and Student Involvement in Malay Literature through Drama Activity

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Abstract

Teaching drama in Brunei presents unique challenges for educators. This study explores the need for a balanced strategy that respects cultural norms and gender roles while encouraging students' involvement. Through a qualitative analysis of researcher and educator experiences, the study highlights the impact of student participation and engagement, with boys and girls often approaching activities differently. The study suggests that tailoring activities to diverse learning styles, creating safe spaces for open conversation and encourage teamwork and respect are crucial in helping students find their voice and develop essential life skills. This paper emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity, an open mind and a readiness to adapt in creating transformative drama approaches. By meeting students where they are approaching the activities with an open mind, educators can empower students to discover their strength, explore new perspectives and gain a deep understanding of themselves and the world around them. The study discusses the importance of achieving this balance to maximize the impact of drama experiences in Brunei classroom.

Keywords: drama activity, Brunei classrooms, cultural norms, gender roles, student engagement

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INTRODUCTION

The global discourse regarding gender disparities in education extends to the field of drama participation in classrooms. In Brunei, this discussion takes on a distinctive aspect because of the cultural and religious traditions that shape how boys and girls are expected to behave. These cultural norms and expectations have a significant impact on student behavior and engagement, particularly in drama, an activity that often involves public speaking, improvisation and teamwork (Wasli, 2023). The influence of drama in education has been academically studied in many countries. Drama has long been recognized as a valuable tool for developing students' imagination, concentration, communication skills, creativity and self-confidence (Annarella, 1992; Kalidas, 2014; Ozbek, 2014). Research by Nordin et al. (2015) and Maolida and Savitri (2017) highlight the benefits of using drama in the classrooms, including improved language skills, increased student engagement and the

development of critical thinking abilities. Drama provides a platform for students to explore different perspectives, express themselves in a safe and supportive environment and increase their competence in a variety of skills areas (Ersöz, 2000; Flynn & Carr, 1994; Kalidas, 2014; Su, 2014).

However, the implementation of drama activities in culturally diverse settings requires careful consideration of local norms and values. In Brunei, the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) philosophy enforces physical separation between boys and girls, influencing how students interact and participate in classroom activities (Wasli, 2023). Schools must follow an ethical code that prohibits any form of contact between girls and boys. While socializing, the gap between male and female students must be as minimal as possible. This extends to classroom seating arrangements where students are typically separated by gender, often by seating boys in the front and girls in the back or dividing them by sides. Boys and girls mingling should be moderated when participating in activities that involve all students. Studies by Hall (1997) and Rizvi and Lingard (2009) emphasize the importance of cultural sensitivity and the need for educators to adapt their teaching methods to respect these cultural norms while fostering an inclusive learning environment. Throughout the research, the researcher must be cautious when it comes to socializing between boys and girls. To ensure cultural practices are maintained and to prevent any misunderstanding, the researcher had to be very careful that male and female students did not touch during the activities.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study explores the interaction between gender roles and cultural practices in Bruneian classrooms, focusing on how these factors affect student involvement in various drama activities. By exploring these factors, this study aims to provide insights into the potential challenges and opportunities for creating inclusive and rewarding drama experiences for students of all genders within Brunei's educational framework. The objective is to develop strategies that respect cultural norms while encouraging student engagement and participation in drama activities, thereby empowering students to discover their strengths and gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them.

METHOD

This qualitative study implemented a comprehensive approach to examine gender-related factors and cultural influences on students' involvement in drama activities in Bruneian secondary schools.

1. Classroom Observations:

- i. **School selection:** Two secondary schools, one situated in a rural area (School A) and the other in an urban area (School B), were selected to capture potential variations in cultural and educational settings.

- ii. **Participants:** A group of 85 students from Year 10 and Year 11, three teachers and three administrators of Schools A and School B participated in this study. With their consent, they provided valuable insights into the classroom setting and educational practices employed in their schools. The participation of the students was indeed very crucial because their learning and involvement in the classroom had been a core area of the observations.
- iii. **Observed activities:** The researcher observed a range of drama activities specifically chosen to encourage diverse forms of participation, including the following:
 - **Whoosh games:** Activities designed to foster spontaneous interaction, creativity and movement.
 - **Improvisation scenarios:** Scenarios were designed to explore various themes and social situations, encouraging dialogue and emotional expression.
 - **Drawing through imagination:** Observations to understand student engagement with materials and collaborative processes.
 - **Warm-up exercise:** Activities that focus on body language, facial expressions and gestures to assess engagement beyond verbal communication.
 - **Writing in Role:** Activities that concentrate on writing from different perspectives, providing a platform for reflection and inspiring specific writing purposes.
 - **Fruit Salad:** Activities that aim to enhance students' communication skills and critical thinking abilities through movement.
 - **Blindfold activity:** Activities that aim to build self-confidence by having one student stand in front of the class while blindfolded and develop trust in others by requiring students to listen to and follow verbal instructions from their peers.

2. Observation focus:

The researcher closely observed the following aspects:

- i. **Level of participation:** The frequency and types of participation exhibited by male and female students.
- ii. **Engagement:** The levels of enthusiasm, confidence and comfort demonstrated by students during various activities.

- iii. **Gendered patterns:** Identifying recurring patterns in participation and engagement based on students' genders.
 - iv. **Classroom interactions:** Observing the interactions between students, teachers and students, particularly during group activities and discussions.
3. **Semi-structured Interviews:**
- i. **Participants:**
Interviews were conducted with three teachers—two from School A and one from School B—who were actively involved in planning and leading drama activities.
 - ii. **Interview focus:**
The interviews explored the following areas:
 - **Teachers' perspectives:**
The perceptions of gender-related factors (such as peer influence, personal interest, etc.) on student participation in drama activities.
 - **Challenges and opportunities:**
The experiences of teachers in creating engaging drama experiences for students of all genders.
 - **Teaching strategies:**
The methods employed by teachers address potential challenges and encourage equal participation among students.

By gathering data from classroom observations and teacher interviews, this study aims to understand how gender expectations and student engagement interact in Bruneian drama classrooms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While academic achievement is a crucial aspect of education, this study did not address academic performance or results among students from both schools. This study mainly focuses on drama-based activities and the implications for students learning Malay Literature and their engagement through drama. This study has identified several key themes.

1. Gender participation:

Boys tended to participate more in activities that involved movement and public speaking (such as whoosh games, improvisation scenarios, blindfold), while girls excelled in writing and drawing tasks. This aligns with traditional gender expectations in Bruneian society, where boys are encouraged to be assertive and girls are socialized towards quieter roles.

Interestingly, both boys and girls excelled in the 'Fruit Salad' activity. The students exhibited a high level of enthusiasm whenever this activity was introduced, often requesting more. It worked out to be the same in both the schools. This was because this activity requires all students to move simultaneously and is structured as a competitive game. In contrast to other group activities which involve only two participants and performed in front of the entire class, this activity allows students to move comfortably in groups. Engagement was high with students actively trying to comprehend and master the rules and sometimes the time allotted was longer than expected.

2. Cultural influence:

In Brunei, schools adhere to regulations rooted in the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) philosophy, which enforces physical separation between boys and girls. This study saw students' reservedness and hesitance when it comes to activities involving interactions and pairing with members of the opposite genders. In both schools, girls generally appeared more reserved and exhibited shyness when participating in front of the class. This hesitancy may be due to the fear of being noticed by boys. However, it is interesting to observe that in classroom where the girls outnumbered the boys, such as in Year 11 at School A, the female students appeared just as engaged and involved as their male peers. This suggests that the gender ratio within the classroom can significantly impact the confidence and active participation of female students. This is not seen as conflicting with culture, as long as the girls do not exceed the boundaries of socializing throughout the activity.

3. Learning preferences:

Despite gender tendencies, this study recognizes the presence of individual preferences. Both boys and girls demonstrated varying levels of excitement and interest depending on the specific activity. This highlights the importance of accommodating diverse learning styles. For instance, boys tend to thrive in hands-on learning experiences that involved physical interaction such as movement, acting out scenes with props or engaging in activities that encourage exploration. This approach appeared to capture their interest and excitement more effectively than passive tasks. In contrast, the girls demonstrated much more comfort with activities that promoted teamwork and encouraged subtle discussion. Lesson that emphasized these modes of engagement seemed to be more successful with female students.

The main point to consider is that every student is unique and has their own preferences (Wehrwein, et.al, 2007), regardless of gender. Educators should aim to accommodate diverse learning styles to help create more engaging and effective learning experiences (Idogho, 2016). A flexible and adaptive approach that caters to a range of preferences, not only helps students feel valued and included but also enhances their ability to actively participate and excel in their learning journey.

This study provides valuable insights into how cultural norms, gender roles and student participation interact in Bruneian drama classrooms. While it is important to respect and uphold cultural values, creating a space where everyone feels welcome and able to participate is just as important. The goal is to nurture an environment in which every student feels comfortable exploring their creativity and talent. However, several challenges have been identified which will be further discussed in the subsequent sections, along with potential areas for future research.

1. Adapting Drama Activities

Drama naturally encourages individuals to step out of their comfort zones and explore different roles. This flexibility offers a valuable opportunity to challenge fixed ideas regarding gender. However, cultural norms that emphasize gender differences might make some people uncomfortable with certain types of drama, such as plays or activities that involve close physical contact or go against traditional gender roles. Therefore, it is crucial to provide clear explanations to prevent drama activities being interpreted as promoting close relationships between male and female students. Regardless of the activities being carried out, social etiquette and boundaries are maintained through the discipline involved in drama activities among students. Engaging in drama activities fosters students' self-discipline, respect for others and understanding of proper conduct in different social situations (Idogho, 2016; López-Daz, 2016; Üstündağ, 1997).

Future research could look into how drama activities can be adapted to address these concerns while still promoting a thoughtful examination of gender roles. This requires a careful approach that respects cultural norms and values.

2. Fostering Inclusive Drama Practices:

- **Tailoring Activities:**

This study highlights the importance of designing drama activities that cater to various learning preferences. Drama activities can be created to accommodate a range of preferences, offering choices for different participation styles (verbal, non-verbal, written) and roles (scripted, improvised, observational). This approach enables students of all genders to recognize their own comfort levels and actively participate in drama activities (Boudreault, 2010; Idogho, 2016). However, the teachers involved in this study noted that the preparation required for drama activities is time-consuming and demanding. Due to limited time availability, they struggled to adequately plan their lessons while also fulfilling the workload commitments linked to this teaching method. Despite these challenges, the study found that students showed a positive and favorable attitude towards participating in drama activities and demonstrating a keen interest in learning the subject. This suggests that it is not essential for teachers to have expertise in drama, as long as they have a basic understanding of how to conduct drama activities successfully.

Future research could explore several crucial areas to build upon the results of this research. First, it would be valuable to explore the long-term effects of this approach on students' personal growth, social skills and

academic performance over time. This would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of these strategies. Moreover, research might look into ways to simplify the implementation of inclusive drama activities for teachers, in order to minimize the time required. Finally, it would be beneficial to examine how students respond to inclusive drama techniques for an extended period, to observe the effects of these approaches on their involvement and learning outcomes.

- **Collaboration and Communication:**

Drama requires both of these skills. Encouraging teamwork and fostering open communication in the classroom helps students develop trust and respect for their peers, regardless of gender (Gallagher, 2005; Hu, 2011; Lehtonen et al., 2016). This, in consequence, establishes a safe environment and encouraging atmosphere for trying new things, expressing oneself and sharing different viewpoints.

Often students exhibited shyness and reservation, with some being hesitant to share their ideas in this study. However, when it comes to working in a group, students appeared to enjoy it. They communicated very well and managed to finish their given task. This can be seen from activities like drawing, improvisation scenarios and the blindfold activity. To ensure all students feel comfortable speaking up and work together in front of their class requires teachers support and motivation. Therefore, future research could investigate whether engaging in drama consistently leads to improved social interactions and relationships both in and outside of school.

3. The Role of Educators:

- **Sensitivity and Cultural Competency:**

Educators play a crucial role in facilitating an engaging and enjoyable drama experiences that foster a sense of belonging among students. It is important to develop an awareness of cultural values and acquire cultural skills to address potential challenges. In this way, they are able to create a secure, nurturing atmosphere in which students feel acknowledged and valued as shown in this study. In this kind of setting, students have the freedom to express themselves without worry of criticism or isolation. This feeling of security and approval motivates students to be adventurous, unleash their imagination and build deep bonds with classmates.

- **Professional Development and Support:**

Offering ongoing professional development to teachers can equip them with essential skills and strategies to tackle gender-related issues and time management in drama classroom. This may include conducting workshops on promoting inclusive practices, adapting activities to meet a variety of needs and managing cultural sensitivity. Workshops can be designed to encourage teachers to use a more diverse and inclusive approach to drama education. Additionally, teachers should be equipped with the ability to adapt activities to meet the various needs of their students. This may include providing

alternative roles or scenarios that allow all students to participate actively, regardless of their gender or personal circumstances. The key is to find a balance - promoting meaningful interaction and collaboration between male and female students without causing discomfort to anyone. By doing so, teachers can learn effective ways to modify and tailor activities to create a supportive and engaging environment for all students.

This study serves as a starting point for delving deeper into how cultural values, gender roles and student engagement interact in drama classrooms in Brunei. Educators can transform drama classrooms into vibrant spaces that cater to all genders by embracing and addressing various elements, promoting open communication and incorporating inclusive practices for students to flourish, acquire knowledge and express themselves. By working together, we can transform the classroom into a place for creative expression as well as promoting mutual understanding, respect and diversity in Bruneian education. Students have the opportunity to genuinely showcase their true selves, expand their viewpoints and appreciate the diversity of their cultural background.

Limitations of the study:

While this study offers valuable insights, it is important to recognize its limitations, particularly within the context of the target population: students enrolled in Malay Literature subject.

1. Limited Sample Size:

This study conducted a small sample size, consisting of only five classes and 85 students studying Malay Literature in two schools. Despite the limited sample size, the study findings emphasize the importance of promoting gender sensitivity and student engagement in the classroom. In Brunei, this approach has been effectively incorporated into the school culture. Inclusive activities like drama can encourage all students to participate, as long as they are conducted in a suitable manner and adjusted to accommodate each student's comfort level. To make the research more comprehensive, it is recommended to expand the study's scope by including a larger and more diverse sample of students studying Malay Literature.

2. Expanding Subject Scope:

This study specifically examines the engagement and participation of students taking Malay Literature. However, it would be beneficial to explore these relationships across different subjects offered in secondary schools to uncover additional aspects and potential variations. For instance, subjects like science and mathematics might elicit different patterns of participation compared to language and literature, given their distinct content. By including students from other subject areas, we could gain a more comprehensive understanding of how gender and cultural factors interact with students' engagement in secondary education.

3. Single Researcher Perspective:

While a single-researcher approach offers consistency in data collection, it can be susceptible to observer bias. To address this issue in School A, two research assistants assisted with data collection through classroom observations. In School B, the researcher collaborated with a teacher who provided valuable insights and facilitated access to classrooms. This multifaceted approach aimed to gather comprehensive data, potentially capture a broader range of classroom experiences and ensure a more balanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. However, further research endeavors could benefit from incorporating an even more diverse research team with varied backgrounds and expertise to further enrich the data collection and interpretation processes.

By acknowledging these limitations and considering the call for further exploration, this study creates an opportunity for future research. By employing diverse methodologies, fostering collaborative research approaches and remaining sensitive to cultural contexts, future research can contribute to the development of inclusive and culturally sensitive drama practices that empower students of all genders to flourish in Bruneian classrooms. Furthermore, by integrating drama with the study of Malay Literature, educators can create a dynamic learning environment that fosters critical thinking skills.

CONCLUSION

Education has been significantly influenced by globalization all over the world. Our education necessitates a diverse approach to keep up with a rapidly changing moral and social environment. While Brunei's education system is rooted in unique cultural and religious values that emphasize respectful social interactions—such as the practice of physically separating male and female students. It is crucial to create inclusive and enriching learning environments that cater to all students.

Many have claimed that drama is one of the components that can be integrated across the curriculum, serving as an effective teaching and learning method or strategy in all subjects. This study has demonstrated that incorporating drama activities, adapted to the cultural context can promote the involvement of both male and female students while still upholding the ethical codes. By respecting these cultural boundaries, students can engage in activities that foster communication skills, collaboration, and self-expression, while also adhering to local customs. This approach not only promotes inclusivity but also enriches the educational experience for all learners in Brunei.

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