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Theatre for a young audience: how can we better prepare kindergartners for the experience?

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This paper presents an approach for preparing children to experience a theatrical performance, *theatre semiotics preparation*. This programme introduces children to the specific elements of the theatrical performance (music, props, costumes, etc.). In the study we compare the efficacy of this new programme with that of traditional *story comprehension preparation*, which introduces children to the play's plot and vocabulary. The participants were 61 children (five to six years of age). Following the programme's implementation, all the children, as a group, attended a theatre performance. After seeing the play, the children were individually interviewed to tap their comprehension of the story and their decoding of the theatrical semiotics. The children in the *theatre semiotics* programme outperformed those of the *story comprehension* programme in their understanding of the theatrical semiotic elements and connecting them to the features of the performance. No differences emerged between the two programmes in story reconstruction or understanding of the play's vocabulary. These results have educational implications for drawing educators' attention to the importance of major components of the theatrical experience. Better understanding of theatre semiotics may enhance children's skills in future decoding and enjoyment of the theatrical experience.

Keywords: story comprehension; theatre semiotics; intervention; theatrical experience; kindergarten; vocabulary

Introduction

Traditionally, when preparing young children to experience a theatrical performance, education practitioners have focused mainly on the play's plot and vocabulary – a *story comprehension* preparation. The present study challenges this method by introducing an innovative programme – *theatre semiotics* preparation, which introduces children

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to key components of the theatrical performance (music, props, costumes, etc.). This programme aims to enhance children's perception and understanding of theatrical forms and processes. In the present study we compare the efficacy of these two educational programmes. The study has potential theoretical and practical implications: it will broaden our understanding of meaning making of theatre among young audiences and will help education policymakers reach decisions on methods of preparing young children for theatre events.

Children's theatre respects its young audiences by representing their hopes, dreams, and fears. Bedard (1997) argues that it inspires ethical choices and encourages awareness of social relations. As educators of young children we asked ourselves: is there an efficient method of enhancing children's experience and understanding of theatre performances? Klein discussed the process of meaning making among young audiences and novice spectators in the theatre. She claims that 'explorative attention to semiotic elements leads to comprehension' (Klein 2005, 47). Elam (2002) defines 'semiotics' as a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society that is equally concerned with signification and communication. The present study's preparation for a theatrical performance derives from drama education. It is based on the assumption that experiencing the process of becoming 'someone else, somewhere else' will assist young children in internalising and making meaning from experiencing theatre semiotics.

Young audience attending the theatre are expected to absorb and understand a flood of stimuli in order to make sense of the performance. They should understand theatrical conventions; the narrative with its exposition, intrigue, and resolution; the characters' traits and interrelations; the play's main themes; the fictional location as set up on the stage and other theatrical elements. Under 'theatre semiotics' we include the auditory/textual aspects of the performance (both wording and intonation), body language (mimicry and movement), the characters' appearance (makeup, hairstyle, and costume), stage design (sets, lighting, and props), and sound (music and sound effects). These symbolic systems interact to create meaning for the audience at both the cognitive and emotional levels. Esslin (1993) indicates that the audience member's capacity to understand the individual signs and sign structures, as well as his or her readiness to devote sufficient attention to it to 'take it all in', will ultimately create meaning for each theatregoer. Given this complexity of cognitive and perceptual input, children need preparation in absorbing and processing this specific type of experience. Schonmann's (2005) study of

children's theatre showed that the children's ability to read some simple signs (e.g. lighting down and curtain up, indicating the beginning of the performance) and more complex ones (e.g. dramatic conventions, music, sound effects, mimicry, gestures, makeup, masks, and props) must be developed. In the present paper we suggest a way to prepare children for this complex theatre experience, the *theatre semiotics* programme.

Commonly, in Israel, before attending a theatre performance, kindergarten teachers tell the class the play's plot. The assumption of the present study is that because there is a difference between literary and theatrical texts, attending a theatrical performance requires preparation that goes beyond knowledge of the play's plot.

Clearly, theatre as a multi-channelled, multi-systemic communication system is not a single-levelled and homogeneous series of signs or signals that emerges, but rather 'a weave of radically differentiated modes of expression' (Elam 2002, 39). The multiple linguistic, visual, and auditory texts encountered in a theatrical production differentiate watching a play from reading a book. A team of collaborators creates the theatrical event, including the director, actors, lighting, set and costume designers, and composers. In the present study, which aims to prepare young children for the complex stimuli of a theatrical performance, we chose developmentally appropriate methods of mediation and adequate semiotic components.

According to Piaget (1928/1973, 1955), children actively seek to understand, interpret, and organise their experiences. They attempt to make sense of their world through active preoccupation with objects and persons. Through repeated actions, perhaps with variations or in different contexts, children establish new levels of knowledge and insights. Once they have constructed these new kinds of knowledge, they use them to develop an increasingly sophisticated awareness of the 'rules' that govern their environment. In the present study the core of the theatre semiotics preparation indeed consists of active involvement with objects and characters in the performance. Through dramatic activities the children are enabled to experience the roles of the semiotic components in the performance (e.g. movement and characters). Active exposure and experimentation with the theatre semiotics fosters children's familiarity with such patterns and aids them in experiencing and making meaning out of the performance in a refined fashion.

Feuerstein (1998) stresses that in order to turn experience into learning, children should be encouraged to name, compare, collect,

and sort data, and to assign meaning to the present experience in regard to previous ones. The theatre semiotics preparation was designed to support children's naming and understanding of theatrical elements before viewing the actual performance. It aims to support children in structuring cognitive tools for organising long-term memory of the theatrical experience. Tools such as these should enable children to extend their knowledge to new theatrical performances and to interpret them more effectively. As mentioned above, the verbal text in a theatrical production is not the only mode of communication onstage. The theatre semiotics preparation in the present study aims to heighten children's awareness of and sensitivity to non-lingual theatrical elements, such as movement, setting, costumes and props, and music. During this preparation children explicitly learn about the function of theatrical elements and experience them in pre-planned dramatic activities. We suggest that drawing the children's attention to specific features of the theatre, asking them to name them, explaining their meaning and purpose, and encouraging them to play with these components, are activities appropriate to these viewers' young age and promote better understanding of the play.

Urian (2001) suggests that an education in theatre is not a prerequisite for becoming a capable and sensitive theatregoer. But Urian's audience consists of adults who already have developed a cultural and mental world of experiences, including moral problems, personal and social motives, and experience with internal and social conflict. Adults, even if they do not possess explicit knowledge of theatrical performances, can still rely on other social capabilities to come to fruitful interpretations of dramatic material. For young children whose social capabilities are not yet fully developed and whose repertoire of social experiences may be too limited to support interpretation of a play, educators and parents should offer an alternative. Thus, imparting theatre semiotics to children may provide them with adequate tools for understanding the play.

The study

The participants were 61 kindergartners[1] (28 boys and 33 girls). The children were sampled from two neighbouring kindergarten classes in the same Tel Aviv school. The teachers of both classes follow the same educational curriculum and both volunteered to participate in the study. Before the commencement of the programmes each class was

assigned either to the *theatre semiotics* programme (32 children) or the *story comprehension* programme (29 children). The programmes and the assessment were conducted by the second author. In Israeli kindergartens, teachers tell stories daily to the whole class in one group and also have short conversations with the class as a whole twice a day. According to the Israeli Ministry of Education, each year kindergartners go with their teachers to three cultural events: a theatre production, a concert, and a museum. Yet since the children in the sample come from a middle to high socio-economic background, it is plausible to assume that they attend additional theatre performances with their families. Before beginning the study we verified that there were no preliminary differences between the two classes in the children's age and gender.

There were three phases to the study: pre-performance, performance, and post-performance. First, in the pre-performance phase, the two educational programmes (theatre semiotics and story comprehension) were implemented in the respective classrooms. The programmes were implemented during the same week in a quiet room in the kindergarten, in groups of about 10 children each and in 30-minute sessions. Second, in the performance phase, one week after programme implementation, the children attended the Hebrew musical, *Utz Li Gutz Li*, based on the Brothers Grimm's *Rumpelstiltskin*, at a large theatre in Tel Aviv. The children in the two programmes attended the same performance on the same day. The audience included many more children and accompanying adults. Last, in the post-performance phase, based on methods taken from adult audience researchers such as Sauter (1988), the reception was assessed. We will first refer to the performance and then to the pre- and post-performance sections.

The theatrical performance – the musical *Utz Li Gutz Li*

The children attended the Hebrew musical, *Utz Li Gutz Li*, based on the Brothers Grimm's *Rumpelstiltskin*. The play *Utz Li Gutz Li* was written by Abraham Shlonsky (1900–1973, a significant Israeli poet influential in the development of Modern Hebrew and its literature in Israel) in sophisticated language. The musical was first presented in Israel in 1965 by the Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv, directed by Yossi Izraeli, and gained high critical acclaim. It was chosen by the Israeli National Art Committee as the best theatre presentation of the year. The children in the present study attended the 2002 Cameri Theatre production, directed by Roni Pinkowicz.

The play has two main themes. The first deals with a pledge and its fulfilment. The miller assures the king that his daughter can weave straw into gold; the king promises to marry the miller's daughter if she turns the straw into gold; the miller's daughter promises the creature Utz Li Gutz Li that she will give him her firstborn son if he helps her turn the straw into gold; Utz Li Gutz Li promises the young woman that he will disappear forever if she can discover his name. The second theme addresses ways of confronting financial crisis. When the kingdom faces financial difficulties, the king's counsellors advise him to levy increased taxes from the citizens. The miller, faced by dire financial straits and unable to pay the tax, tells the king that his daughter can turn straw into gold. Since it was first produced, *Utz Li Gutz Li* is considered a classic among children's musicals in Israel.

This production was chosen for the study because of its high quality. A respected critic wrote, 'Unlike many sloppy children's theatre presentations, it is a pleasure to attend a professional theatre presentation that pays attention to detail. It is a charming classic performance for children' (Yaron 2002).

Pre-performance: preparation

The theatre semiotics programme

The theatre semiotics programme focused on comprehension of the semiotic components and their role in the meaning making of the performance. In this programme, each session focused on specific theatrical elements that the children would encounter in the musical and which are important for the understanding of a theatrical performance (movement and music, costumes and props, and the set).

(1) *First session.* The first session focused on movement and music. The children learned to interpret characters' traits as mediated through movement as well as interpreting atmosphere as transmitted through music.
   (a) *Movement*. The movement of the characters onstage helps create theatrical metaphors, emphasises conflicts, and highlights the characters' traits and nature. In this activity, the children attempted to act as various characters from *Utz Li Gutz Li* using movement and physical gestures to define different features. They sat and walked like a king, a grotesque king, an elegant lady, a citizen entering the royal palace for the first time, a sneaky person, etc. Thought-

provoking questions were asked to encourage discussion that would help the children understand the association between the characters' movements and their traits (e.g. how might poor people walk, sit or move in the royal palace when entering it for the first time?); movement and motives (e.g. how might a sneaky person walk into a room if he intends to do evil, and how can we infer this from his body language?); and movement and feelings (e.g. what can we presume or guess about a person who is walking, crying, or sitting with his shoulders slumped?).

(b) *Music*. Theatrical music attunes the audience's emotions and creates dramatic motives. It is also a tool in building the plot and forming the characters. Music colours events and discloses the mood and attitude of the character acting onstage. In this activity, the children expressed the feelings that the *Utz Li Gutz Li* music evoked in them by moving, dancing, and gesturing, while listening to it. Each piece of music affected children's speed of movement, gestures, expressions, and feelings differently. Discussions among the children were encouraged to foster understanding of the association between the music and the atmosphere. For example, the children moved in the room to the sound of a rhythmical, cheerful piece of music that conveyed a sense of festivity. The children were asked to imagine who moves like that. How does the character feel now? What can we infer about the character's intentions or actions? Can we add gestures that will emphasise what we feel when hearing the music?

(2) *Second session*. The second session focused on costumes and props. The children were exposed to the role of the costumes and props in presenting the characters' traits and roles. Costumes and props often reflect aspects of characters and transmit messages regarding the characters' class, personality, age, and profession. Different clothes and accessories such as a crown, a gown, or a tattered tunic were placed in the centre of the room and the children were invited to select and wear a costume and add an accessory to it. They were guided to imitate a character that could match the costume in some respects. They were directed to do so by walking at an appropriate pace, adding the character's gestures, using mimicry to express mood, and adding a sentence representing the character's voice and

intonation. Then the 'characters' were asked to engage in dialogues with one another. These encounters between the characters were accompanied by questions to encourage the children's exploration and understanding of the association between costumes and identities: what kind of person would be dressed this way? What can you say about his profession, his occupation, and his attitude towards others?

(3) *Third session*. The third session focused on the set, and the children experienced it as the fictional location. The set indicates the location where the dramatic action takes place, defining the characters present onstage, and carrying messages regarding the character's class, attribution, age, and profession. In this case the activity involves the plastic arts. Each child was given a schematic illustration of a house and of two contrasting figures, a king and a poor miller (illustrations from the play in question). The children were then asked to create, according to their understanding and imagination, appropriate housing for each figure using materials such as canvas, wood, torn pieces of cardboard, golden fabrics, glittering paper, and silver and gold miniature stars. The activity was accompanied by a discussion of the function of the set in establishing the location and space represented onstage.

The story comprehension programme

The story comprehension programme focused on comprehension of the play's narrative and its vocabulary (words that are not used in everyday discourse). In each of the three sessions, the children listened to the play's narrative (*Utz Li Gutz Li*, 21 scenes). The story was divided into three parts, each communicated in a separate session. The story was presented in the same sequence as in the stage performance. The children were exposed to the complex plot, its sequence, exposition, intrigue, and resolution; they discovered the characters and their interrelations; and they learnt the play's vocabulary.

(1) *The first session*. The first part of the play. First, the children learnt the origins of the play (based on *Rumpelstiltskin*, a German folk legend). Then the researcher focused on the plot. She read the first part of the play to the children, discussed its meaning, and introduced the main characters and their role in the play. The researcher then introduced the new vocabulary. The

children learnt and discussed three words that are usually unfamiliar to children and which appear in the play's first part.

(2) *The second session*. The second part of the play. The session commenced with a review of the plot related in the first session, including a review of the previous three difficult words. Then the researcher focused on the plot. She read the second part of the play and discussed it with the children. Lastly, the children learnt and discussed three additional unfamiliar words.

(3) *The third session*. The third part of the play. This session also began with a review of the first two plot sections and the six previously learned words. Then the remaining plot was described and discussed. Three more words were clarified. At the end, the whole play was reviewed and discussed as a story.

Post-performance assessment – the reception

'I retired to the corner', Izraeli says about the first performance, 'alone, with my fears and doubts. Suddenly I heard the roar of joy and enthusiasm of the children around me. I watched him (Shlonsky), he sat calmly in his seat. There was a delightful smile on his face, as if saying: I knew it would be that way. There's no other way possible' (Livne, in an interview with the director Izraeli, 1973). Two days after the performance, each child was individually interviewed in the kindergarten. The interview was aimed at assessing the child's reception of the play, referring to the specific semiotic elements, comprehension of the plot and the story's vocabulary.

Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and included open-ended questions designed to capture the child's understanding of the play and the theatrical experience. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analysed employing quantitative tools. The interview was based on Sauter's (1988) notion of group theatre conversations, and Tindemans' (1988) personal theatre interviews. These interviews were designed to assess the audience reception of the performance. Tindemans' use of tools such as videocassettes to help the spectator go back to the experience encouraged us to use pictures taken from the theatre programme and pieces of music from the CD of the show to refresh the memory of the performance.

The interview comprised three parts: theatre language interview, story reconstruction, vocabulary understanding.

(1) *Theatre language comprehension interview*. This part tapped children's awareness of visual and musical theatrical elements:
   (a) *Visual elements*. Stimuli were three coloured, still photographs from the play that represented the three visual elements: movement, costumes and props, and the set. To assess the extent to which the children formed the association between the visual element and its theatrical implication, they were asked four open-ended questions regarding each picture: What do you see in the picture? What does the picture remind you of in the performance? What are the traits of the character shown in the picture? How do we know that these are his or her traits? A high score (2) for the question on movement and traits of the character would be for answers such as[2]: 'He is a little wicked, because of his face, that he goes like this with his hand, and covers his eye'. A lower score (1) would be for answers such as: 'Because of the face – evil'; 'Because he did all sorts of tricks. Suddenly he comes out of the table.' Answers such as the following were given the lowest score (0): 'He is good because he's happy, because he has gold'.
   (b) *Musical elements*. Stimuli were two musical pieces from the production. To represent the function of music as generating atmosphere, one piece was cheerful and the other gloomy. To assess the extent to which the children formed an association between the musical element and the theatrical atmosphere created, as well as revealing the characters' emotions, they were asked three open-ended questions: What do we hear through the music? What can we say regarding the characters that are singing? What leads us to understand what the character's emotions are? A high score (2) on the question about music and its representation of the atmosphere would be for answers such as: 'You can understand that they are happy because they say the words happily'; 'You can understand the trait of the character that they are happy. If they would have sung in a lower voice that is a sign that they were sad'. A lower score (1) would be for answers such as: 'You hear they are happy'; 'Because of what they sing'. Answers such as the following were given the lowest score (0): 'They are happy because he fell into the hall'.

(2) *Story reconstruction*. Children were asked to tell the story as they remembered it from the performance. The interview was analysed for three indices: the plot's sequence; main themes; and correct sentences. Each was scored as follows:

(a) *The plot's sequence*. Children's reconstruction of the plot's sequence was scored for inclusion of the three parts of the plot:

- *Exposition*: description of the king/palace/ministers. For example: 'The story is about a king, who at the beginning didn't want to have a queen', or 'In the beginning there were the guards in the palace, and then the king came'.
- *Intrigue*: three days when straw turns into gold. For example: 'The guard pushed the miller's daughter to where she had to weave straw into gold', or 'Every day the little man came and asked her to give him something, and he will turn the straw into gold'.
- *Resolution*: the queen discovers the creature's name. For example: 'She said your name is Utz Li Gutz Li! And then he disappeared', or 'The little man cried: No! no! no! and ran away because she found out!'

The number of parts of the plot the children mentioned was counted ranging from 0 to 3. For example: for the exposition the child earned a point if he or she said: 'The story is about a king, who at the beginning didn't want to have a queen, but later on the miller came to him and said he has a daughter. He owed him money, so he didn't bring it. So he said about his daughter that she can weave gold out of straw'. The child would not get a point for the exposition if he or she said something like: 'It's about the story where there were actors that studied in the university to be actors' or 'It tells about one person that was named 'Utz Li Gutz Li', he had a hidden secret, the miller's daughter had to weave the straw into gold and then the guard pushed her to where she had to weave straw'.

(b) *Main themes*. Children's reconstruction of the plot was scored for inclusion of three main themes: (1) the lie told to the king: 'He said his daughter knew how to weave gold from straw, and actually, she didn't at all'; (2) the promise to Rumpelstiltskin: 'He said: If I weave all the straw into gold for you, you will give me your firstborn child. She didn't think twice', and (3) the revelation of the creature's name: 'And then she said:

your name is ... ''Little man.'' He said ''no''. Then she said: your name is ''Utz Li Gutz Li''. And he said ''yes''. And they haven't seen him forever and ever.' The number of themes was counted, ranging from 0 to 3.

(c) *Correct sentences.* We counted the sentences used during the story reconstruction that correctly reflected the plot. We counted sentences such as, 'And then he just made the gold from straw for her'. We did not count incorrect sentences like: 'Because the king knew too that all the children knew how to make straw of gold and only he didn't'.

(3) *Vocabulary understanding.* Children were asked to define 12 less common Hebrew words that appear in the play's text. The story comprehension group encountered nine of these words during the preparatory programme, but the theatre semiotics group only encountered them in the performance itself. The definitions were scored on a three-point scale: 0 – the child did not grasp the meaning of the word; 1 – partial understanding; and 2 – full understanding. For example, for the word 'maid': (0) 'It's a girl'; (1) 'She cleans'; (2) 'Servant'.

Comparing the programmes' effectiveness

We compared the children in the two programmes for their understanding of the theatrical semiotic language, the play's plot, and vocabulary.

Understanding theatre semiotics

Children in the theatre semiotics programme outscored those in the story comprehension programme on the understanding of the theatrical elements that were assessed during the interview. Figure 1 illustrates these differences and Table 1 presents the children's average score on each feature for each programme. One can see that on average children in the theatre semiotics programme scored higher than those in the story comprehension programme. The children in the theatre semiotics programme referred to the semiotic elements and tended to explain them, while those in the story comprehension programme only mentioned them partially. A series of statistical analyses that compared the means of the two programmes on each of the theatre semiotic measures proved that the children in the

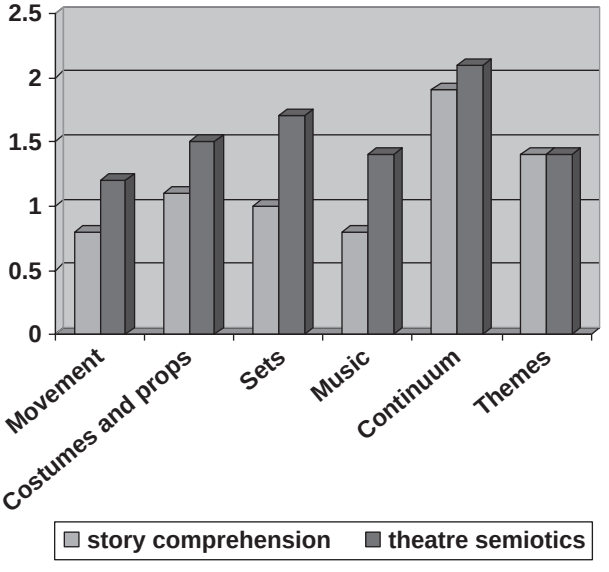


Figure 1. Comparing the theatre semiotics and the story comprehension programmes in understanding of the theatrical elements.

theatre semiotics programme better understood the theatre semiotics compared with those in the story comprehension programme.

Understanding of the play's plot

We assessed the children's understanding of the play in both programmes by means of the reconstruction task. We asked the children to tell the story and estimated their reference to the plot's sequence, main themes, and number of sentences relevant to the play. Children in both programmes reconstructed the story using approximately 18 sentences. Children in the two programmes reconstructed the story referring very similarly to the plot of the play. As to children's reference to the plot's sequence, Table 1 and Figure 1 show that the children in both programmes usually referred to only two of the three parts of the play. Sentences such as the following referred to the first part: 'Once there was a palace of all the kingdom of Utz, and a servant and the lady of the court and the lady in charge of the rooms . . .' or 'There was a king who had Utz Li Gutz Li. The ministers told him that he spent a lot of money because a lot of clothes were bought for him . . .' For the second part, we counted sentences such as: 'And then they left her another time, and a midget came. What will you give me in return?' or 'He wove golden balls. In the morning, the king was astonished.' For

Table 1. Comparing the theatre semiotics and the story comprehension programmes on understanding theatre language and the play's plot.

	Theatrical elements	Scores range	Story comprehension	Theatre semiotics
Understanding the theatrical elements	Movement	0–2	0.82	1.18
	Costumes and props	0–2	1.14	1.46
	Sets	0–2	1.00	1.69
	Music	0–2	0.78	1.42
Understanding the play's plot	Continuum	0–3	1.96	1.93
	Themes	0–3	1.39	1.41
	Sentences	0–	19.74	16.07
Vocabulary	Vocabulary from the story comprehension programme	0–2	0.44	0.56
	New vocabulary from the play	0–2	0.20	0.18

the third part of the play, we counted sentences such as: 'And then he said: No, no, no! And then they made a great feast'. Or ' . . . and then he ran and hid in the palace, and then she said to him: 'Utz Li Gutz Li' many times. And then they sang the song you played for me before, and the story came to an end'.

Similarly, children from both programmes mentioned approximately two of the three themes of the play (the deception, the promise, the name revelation). Examples include reference to the deception theme: 'Then she lied to the king'; the promise theme: 'When she didn't have anything else to give him, she promised him her firstborn child'; the revelation theme: 'He came back with names and then, at the end, they told him it was 'Utz Li Gutz Li', and she guessed the name of the little man'.

These results may relate to the children's developmental stage. The reconstruction of continuity is an ability that develops with age, as shown by the older children in our sample doing better than their younger counterparts. A series of statistical analyses compared the performance of the children in the two programmes on each of the plot's comprehension measures. These analyses found that children in the theatre semiotics programme understood the plot as well as the children in the story comprehension programme. Thus, although the children in the theatre semiotics programme did not focus on the play's plot, they did as well as their counterparts who studied the plot in detail.

The play's vocabulary

Regarding children's grasp of the play's vocabulary, we assessed all participants on the nine words from the play that were studied in the story comprehension programme, and three more words from the play that were not. The children in the two programmes found it difficult to define the words. The scale on word definition ranged from 0 (wrong definition) to 2 (correct definition). Table 1 shows that none of the children in either group could fully define all the words. Children in both groups could either partially define the words or could not define them correctly at all. As noted above, *Utz Li Gutz Li* is written in sophisticated Hebrew and includes many expressions that may be beyond the comprehension of children of kindergarten age. Interestingly, the results of the study show that the children understood the play despite their difficulty in defining the assessed words. This finding is interesting for reception studies scholars due to the fact that educators have traditionally considered the play's plot as the centre of the theatre performance. The present study implies that words may play just a part in decoding a performance. Perhaps the theatre's special language – the semiotics (in this case the music, props, and set) – is even more important in creating a theatrical experience for children of kindergarten age.

Additional analysis of the story reconstruction counted the spontaneous references of the whole sample to specific semiotic elements during the story reconstruction. The results indicated that the children in the study mentioned mostly music, props and set. Other elements such as lighting or acting were hardly mentioned (see Figure 2). Perhaps some components are more conspicuous than others to children of this age. If so, it is important to refer to them while preparing children for attending a play. The fact that the performance was a musical probably added to the relevance of the music component. Children's concentration on some theatrical semiotic components while partially ignoring others is worthy of further study. A deeper understanding of this issue may contribute to the planning of future theatre preparation programmes.

Conclusions

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states, 'States shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of

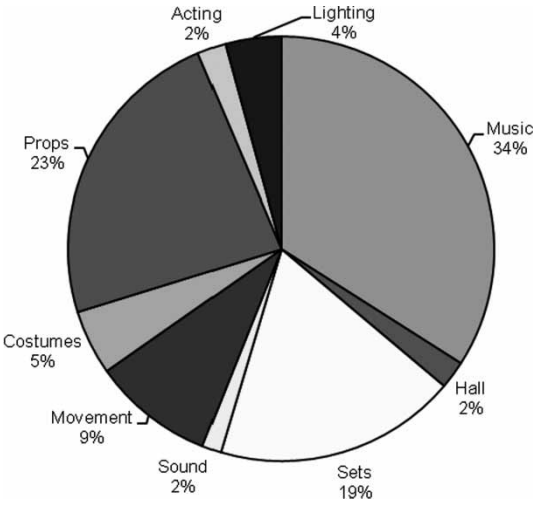


Figure 2. Reference to theatrical components in both programmes.

appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, and recreational and leisure activity' (Article 31b, 1990).

In this paper we have focused on the child's need to experience and understand theatrical performances, which constitute an important aspect of our culture. We have presented a programme for kindergartners, theatre semiotics, which aims to equip them with more tools to decode a theatre production and promote their understanding of the theatre. We compared the benefits of the theatre semiotics programme with those of the traditional story comprehension programme in which kindergarten teachers in Israel prepare children to view theatre by focusing on the play's plot and vocabulary.

We expected that children in the theatre semiotics programme would outperform those in the story comprehension programme on items associated with theatrical elements. Results exceeded expectations. As expected, the theatre semiotics preparation group outperformed the story comprehension group in understanding the theatrical elements of the show and in connecting them to the play's components. Moreover, no differences emerged between the two groups in the story reconstruction and the understanding of the play's vocabulary. These results are interesting, especially in view of the fact that during the preparation, the story comprehension group dwelt more than the theatre semiotics group on the language and the plot.

These findings highlight the importance of reference to the unique elements of the different media (storybook, film, television, or play). We suggest that parents and educators of young children be aware of

these differences in the nature of each of these modes of representation, and refer to each of them adequately. Despite the importance of theatre in our culture, children often lack the experience that promotes better understanding. The theatre semiotics programme presented in this paper provides children with observation tools designed for a better understanding of the theatre as a medium, and for a better interpretation of plays.

The theatre semiotics programme constitutes a tool that mediates between the children and the performance. This type of mediation enables acquaintance with those elements necessary for comprehending theatrical phenomena, facilitates a search for associations and connections between these phenomena, and offers the benefits of improvement and change (Feuerstein 1998). Children in the theatre semiotics programme are likely to be able to apply the acquired tools, which are not specific to the particular play for which it prepared them, to the interpretation of other plays as well.

Interestingly, the children in the story comprehension programme did not outperform their counterparts in the theatre semiotics programme in recreating the play's story and the understanding of its vocabulary. This suggests that a play constitutes a different mode of communication and representation than a story read to the child, and as such calls for different preparation and reference. It seems that theatre semiotics preparation provided the young audience with tools to understand the play without dwelling on the play's story. The theatre is a total mode of representation that engulfs its audience in multiple stimuli. The theatre semiotics programme better prepared the children to understand and absorb these stimuli. Perhaps preparation for these special features of the theatre frees the children to experience both the story and the specifically theatrical semiotic components.

This pioneering study needs to be retested, reconfirmed, and expanded in future studies. We encourage future studies to use diverse methods in assessing the efficacy of programmes aimed at enhancing children's understanding of the theatrical experience. In the present study we used verbal interviews and picture stimuli as a means of testing the efficacy of the programmes. Future studies are encouraged to use other kinds of response, e.g. the children's ability to respond by creating their own dramas, using costumes, props and so forth, or by drawing the sequence of the plot. Moreover, we encourage researchers to assess children twice: after watching the taught theatre production and later after watching a different one. This

line of research may shed light on the implications of the programme on the children's future theatre experiences.

In summary, we suggest that childhood educators pay close and specific attention to the different media to which children are currently exposed. While theatre is a crucial mode of artistic expression within our culture, it is less accessible to young children than television or the computer. It is the responsibility of society as a whole and of individual parents to help children learn to enjoy and appreciate the aesthetics of our culture. The present study presented the benefits of introducing children to theatre semiotics as a way of helping them to better understand and enjoy the theatre. We urge educators to consider the findings of the study and to draw children's attention to the whole theatrical experience rather than to the story and its words alone.

Notes

1. Kindergartners in Israel are five to six years old.
2. The examples of the children's responses throughout the paper are their self-expressions translated from Hebrew.

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