

## Self-Esteem of Youth Participating in Theatre Performance: A Malaysian Scenario

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### ABSTRAK

Satu daripada aspek pertumbuhan yang penting di peringkat awal dewasa adalah pembentukan identiti. Kejayaan pertumbuhan di peringkat ini menjadi asas kepada pembangunan belia di mana aspek pertumbuhan seterusnya ialah pembentukan hubungan intim. Belia yang mempunyai konsep sendiri yang sangat tinggi berupaya membentuk hubungan dan keintiman hubungan dengan individu lain. Dalam konteks ini, teater dikira sebagai satu program pembangunan kerana melalui persembahan belia boleh menonjolkan identiti baru dan boleh menerokai diri mereka sendiri. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti tahap sendiri belia yang menyertai persembahan teater dan mengenal pasti elemen di dalam persembahan teater yang menyumbang kepada pembentukan konsep sendiri. Hasil kajian mendapati bahawa belia yang menyertai persembahan teater mempunyai tahap sendiri yang tinggi.

### ABSTRACT

A major developmental task during adolescent is the development of a sense of identity. The success of this stage of development will be the basis for development in the next stage of the developmental as a youth; where the development task is to build intimate relationship. Youth with a strong sense of self-esteem will establish better relationship and greater intimacy with another person. In this aspect, theatre is identified as one of the common developmental programs used because through performing, the youth are able to project a new identity and discover themselves. The study was aimed at identifying the extent of the self-esteem development among the youth as a result of participating in theatre performances and identifying the most influential theatre performance elements that contributed to the development of self-esteem. The findings of the study indicated that youth who participated in the theatre performances had a higher level of self-esteem.

### INTRODUCTION

Adolescent is a critical stage for development because it is a stage of identity versus role confusion (Erikson 1950). A major developmental task during this stage is the development of a sense of identity. Though identity is not formed exclusively in adolescent, identity is significantly transformed during this period of life (Kroger,

1996). This is a period where they feel insecure about themselves; about who they are and what they will become. Without developing a positive self-esteem, this phenomenon will lead to a sense of isolation during the stage of young adulthood or *youth* in the context of Malaysia<sup>1</sup>. As described by Erikson, youth at the age of young adulthood are expected to establish a close and committed relationship with another person.

<sup>1</sup> Malaysia defines youth between the ages of 15 to 40.

However, only after the Industrial Revolution in the 60's and 70's, there is a gradual increase in the age of adolescence into the late 20's as the period of exploration, education and interim status extended; a continuous dependence on family or the state and thus delay role definition and security of identity as described by Erikson (1968). Therefore, many models of the past that were built on the assumption that college students were young adults who were ready for the developmental task of building intimate relationship may not be relevant. In an age where adulthood is delayed and adolescence is lengthening, each stage of the psychosocial development may vary as well.

Similarly, the United Nations General Assembly defined youth, as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years inclusively. This definition was made for the International Youth Year, held around the world in 1985. However, the operational definition and nuances of the term 'youth' often vary from country to country, depending on the specific socio-cultural, institutional, economic and political factors. As in Malaysia, youth is defined between the ages of 15 to 40 years old but for operational purposes, youth activities are targeted for youth between the age of 15 to 25.

According to Harper and Marshall (1991), adolescent who admit to experiencing more serious problems tend to have poor self-esteem. They become highly dependent upon the peer group for support and susceptible to peer pressure. Hence, adolescents with low self-esteem are associated with a host of problems including drug and alcohol abuse, eating disorders, depression and suicide. This makes it difficult for them to form a positive and healthy relationship as they move to the next stage of life and into the society. This concept of self-esteem is founded on the premise that it is strongly connected to a sense of competence and worthiness as well as the relationship between the two as one lives life. Worthiness might be considered a psychological aspect of the self-esteem, while competence might be considered as a behavioural or sociological aspect of the self-

esteem. Self-esteem stems from the experience of living consciously and might be viewed as a person's overall judgment of himself or herself pertaining to self-competence and self-worth based on reality (Reasoner 2000). Therefore, a positive self-esteem is indispensable to normal and healthy adolescent and youth development because it provides resistance, strength and a capacity for regeneration (Branden 1992).

Developmental scientists, policy makers and practitioners working with youth believe that enhancing the lives of youth with positive opportunities and experiences can reduce the likelihood and magnitude of youth related problems (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1995; Dryfoos 1996). Realizing this, many youth developmental programs have been organized to help youth to develop. Performing arts, theatre specifically, is one of the common developmental programs used primarily in the United States, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Courtney 1980). Performing allows the youth to discover about themselves and their lives. Performing gives them the ability to project a new identity and this kind of developmental activity is vital (Courtney 1980). Studies show that sustained involvement in theatre arts associates with a variety of development for youth: gains in reading proficiency, self-concept and motivation and higher levels of empathy and tolerance for others. One of the most important functions of theatre in human society is to give one the experience of situations that they do not encounter often enough in real life (Wilson 1994). Live performance is not just a simulation of everyday behaviour, it is a biological stimulator (Pradier 1990). According to Wilson (1994), the study of theatre is of great value to psychologists because it is a vital part of life. Essentially human preoccupations and conflicts are played out on stage and in films, not just for entertainment, but also for self-discovery, catharsis and impetus for social change. Psychology, then, as 'the science of behaviour and experience' and theatre as 'a mirror to life' each has a lot to offer the other.

In order to rise to the challenges and cope with the effects of rapid economic development and globalization, Malaysia too has many youth development programs that aim to benefit the youth. However, the focus is mainly on sport activities, leadership trainings, healthy lifestyle programs and community social services (Seventh Malaysia Plan, 1996) with the most recent approach, the National Service. Unlike in most developed countries where theatre has been introduced as an art in the school curriculum, Malaysia's attempt in introducing theatre in school is still at the infant stage.

It was encouraging to note that there is an increased in the number of youth participating in theatre based on the increasing number of theatre groups in Malaysia. Hence, there is a need to explore the potential of theatre as a vehicle for youth identity development in Malaysia. Firstly, this study will look into the level of self-esteem of youth participated in theatre performance specifically. Secondly, the study will identify the elements in the theatre performance, namely role-playing, script development and analysis, speech, improvisation, gesture and physical movement as well as characterization have the greatest influence towards the development of self-esteem.

### METHODOLOGY

This study focused on the theatre students of two higher learning institutions, namely Academy Seni Kebangsaan and Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), (N = 138) offering diploma courses in Theatre with very well established and systematic syllabus. A total of 10 items with a five point Likert format (1= Strongly Disagree, 5= Strongly Agree) were used to assess the respondents' level of self-esteem. The 10 items questionnaire was adapted from Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES), 1986. The original Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has high reliability: test-retest correlations in the range of .82 to .88 whereas, Cronbach's alpha for various samples are in the range of .77 to .88.

The levels of self-esteem were categorized into three levels based on the items and score using the equal class interval method. There were low, moderate and high and were calculated as follows: The minimum score for self-esteem were 1 point x 10 variables = 10 points and the maximum score were 5 points x 10 variables = 50 points. The class interval is  $(50 - 10) / 3 = 13$ . The level of self-esteem was then categorized into:

- a. Low (0 – 13)
- b. Moderate (14 – 26)
- c. High (27 – 40)

Before the adapted questionnaire can be used, content validity and reliability tests were conducted. Firstly, informal interviews with the lecturers who teach theatre and some alumni who had graduated from the theatre class were conducted. These informal interviews were conducted in order to obtain a better understanding of the overall picture of theatre in relation to the students' development in both the lecturers and student's point of view. This had become the background in understanding the outcome of the survey at the later stage. It also gave a general information and background understanding of the population. The initial observation from these interviews indicated that theatre helped, boost self-confidence, develop creativity, improve speech and expression and develop understanding of human relationships through learning the characters and analysing the script and story lines. The lecturers and alumni were also asked to check the content of the questionnaire for content validity.

A pilot study was conducted with a smaller group consisting of 18 students to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire in the local context. This pilot study also served to collect feedback from the respondents pertaining to anything related to the construction of the questionnaire. This step was taken to avoid cultural bias, as the questionnaire used was adopted. The test-retest reliability and the Cronbach's alpha were also tested.

After pilot testing, necessary amendments were made to the questionnaires before giving out to 109 students for the actual survey. Initially, the students were asked to gather in a spacious and comfortable classroom, where their lecturer then brief them on the purpose and intention of the survey. The questionnaires were distributed and the students were free to ask anything they did not understand on the questionnaires. There was no time limitation for them to complete the questionnaire. Therefore, the students had ample time to read and understand the questions before answering them and sufficient time to complete all the questions. This was very crucial as it ensures all questionnaires were valid for further testing. The returned questionnaires were coded, computed and analysed using the SPSS.

The actual data collected were tested for reliability using the Cronbach's Alpha analysis. It was observed that the coefficients of all the scales for the pre test were in the range of 0.70 to 0.77, while for the final test they were in the range of 0.70 to 0.78. Such high a coefficient indicated the reliability of the instrument and dimensions used. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the data in this study.

## FINDINGS

The cumulative mean average ratings were used to determine the level for items in the instrument of the self-esteem. Frequency was used to determine the level of self-esteem measured. The descriptive statistics, mean and standard deviation were used to discuss on each theatre element, which has the greatest influence towards the development of self-esteem.

From the descriptive statistic generated, the respondents' average age is 20.6 year old with the minimum and maximum ages of 19 and 25 years, respectively. The results showed that majority of the respondents (81.7%) had a high level of self-esteem while 18.3% reported a moderate level of self-esteem. No respondents reported a low level of self-esteem. The chi-square value is 43.68 with the p value

of 0.05. This indicates that the proportion of the respondents with high level of self-esteem is significantly higher than the moderate level.

TABLE 1  
Distribution of respondents by their level of self-esteem

Level of Self-Esteem	Frequency	Percent
Moderate	20	18.3
High	89	81.7
Total	109	100.0

$$\chi^2 = 43.679 \quad df = 1 \quad p\text{-value} = 0.05$$

The high level of self-esteem indicates that these students are positive about themselves. They have a strong sense of personal worth and self-competence. According to Taylor and Brown (1988), individuals with high self-esteem are able to access more positive thoughts about themselves after failure.

The 10 items questionnaire was used in the scale to measure self-esteem and out of which, 5 items were reverse in values, namely items no. 3, no. 5, no. 8, no. 9 and no. 10. As shown in Table 2, three items were rated very highly. The items were item no. 6 followed by item no. 1 and then item no. 2. Item no. 6 indicated that the respondents took a positive attitude towards themselves and item no. 1 indicated that the respondents had self-worth or at least on an equal plane with others. Finally item no. 2 indicated that the respondents felt that they were competent and possessed a number of good qualities. Theoretically, these three items are related with the characteristics of high self-esteem. According to Blascovich and Tomaka (1991), self-esteem refers to an individual's sense of his or her value or worth or the extent to which a person values, approves of and appreciates himself or herself. The high scores for these 3 items corresponded directly to the overall high level of self-esteem among the students.

On the other hand, item with the lowest ranking (lowest mean value) is item no. 8. This item indicates the level of respect the respondents have for themselves. As this is one

TABLE 2  
Measures of central tendency and variability for self-esteem by items

Statements of Self-Esteem	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sum
1. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	4.20	0.73	454
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	4.12	0.59	449
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	3.93	0.79	428
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.	3.74	0.73	408
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	4.00	1.02	435
6. I take a positive attitude towards myself.	4.27	0.69	465
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	3.82	0.86	416
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.	3.50	1.22	382
9. I certainly feel useless at times.	3.89	0.96	424
10. At times, I think I am no good at all.	4.00	0.89	435

of the items in the reverse value, the lowest mean value of 3.50 indicates that the majority of the respondents do respect themselves and they do not look down upon themselves. Hence, the overall result of this study is very positive as it indicates that the respondents doing theatre performances have a high level of self-esteem despite the fact that most adolescence or young adults at these ages are believed to have a decrease in their self-esteem.

According to Malhi and Reasoner (2000), the general characteristics of individuals with a high self-esteem involves self confident, assume responsibility for their own lives, accept themselves unconditionally, tolerate frustrations well, assertive, seek continuous self-improvement, outgoing, have peace within themselves, willing to take calculated risks, enjoy good interpersonal relationships, loving and lovable and self-directed. Self-esteem does not involve feelings of superiority. "High self-esteem people tend to be free of arrogance or contempt for others or to manifest other behaviour that we associate with the idea of superiority" Rosenberg (1989). They recognize their weaknesses or limitations and constantly seek to change what they can for personal improvement. Therefore, the result is very significant as it demonstrated the benefits of the theatre performance towards the development of self-esteem among the youth.

In order to answer the second objective of the study, several elements in theatre performance were selected for this study to determine their influence or effects towards the development of the respondents' self-esteem. The theatre elements selected for this study include role-play, script development and analysis, speech, improvisation, gesture and physical movement as well as characterization. These few elements were selected because they are the major elements in theatre performance. Besides, the six elements also cover both the preparatory and performance stages in a theatre performance.

TABLE 3  
Mean for each theatre element for self-esteem

Theatre Elements	Mean	Standard Deviation
Role Play	3.376	0.825
Improvisation	3.174	1.070
Characterization	3.055	1.104
Speech	2.688	1.324
Gesture and Physical Movement	2.679	1.380
Script Development and Analysis	2.358	1.431

Results in Table 3 show that role-play has the highest mean value for self-esteem followed by improvisation and

characterization. The theatre element with the least mean value for self-esteem is script development and analysis. This indicates that among the six theatre elements, role-play has the greatest influence towards the development of the participants' self-esteem whereas the script development and analysis has the least influence towards the development of the participants' self-esteem.

### DISCUSSION

As youth struggle with the crisis of identity versus role confusion, it is important to assist them in resolving this issue in a healthy and safe manner. Success in resolving this conflict will build a solid foundation for them when they enter the next phase of life – adulthood. In light of this, theatre was explored as a youth identity development program because the experience entails repetition of actions, thoughts or emotions, role-playing, improvisation, characterization, script development and analysis, over which the adolescent gains increased tolerance or mastery. These are essential in helping the youth to mediate their confusion and develop their identity, self-esteem primarily as they struggle with the issues of identity, independence, competency and social role. This study has identified that role-playing, improvisation and characterization specifically that have the greatest influence on the development of self-esteem.

Generally, the youth who participated in theatre, experienced the development in self-esteem because the theatre performance provides them with a vehicle for a safe expression of their inner most feelings and built on their competency that brought about satisfaction, confidence, hope and positive thinking. These are mainly important for the youth in Malaysia because it comprises of a multi ethnic society. In order to live in peace and harmony in such a society, it requires great tolerance and understanding is required, the element which stems from positive thinking, confidence and high level of self-esteem.

Though the population of this study is small (109), the theories from the literature

review supports the results obtained in this study. Young people need to develop their inner resources such as identity and skills in order for them to be able to cope with the pressures and challenges that might lead them into unhealthy and confused behaviours. According to some psychological theories, development is not what happens to people; it is the people engaging in the process of growing, transforming and creating new options for how to be and relate to the world. Theatre performance has elements that allow the youth to keep growing, transform their weaknesses, challenge their limitations and provide a lot of opportunities for them to create new options and to test out the different roles. Therefore, these elements in the theatre performance do help the youth to develop their self-esteem.

Role-play for example, is a dramatic form where the actors try out possible futures in role (Courtney 1980). For Erikson, youth is an age of struggling with identities and therefore, role confusion occurs. Many of their improvisations and role-play in the theatre performance enable them to test out the qualities of the characters in terms of what is most desirable and comfortable with the participants. Hence, as actor on stage, they explore the different roles in life, without fear of making mistakes and experience spontaneous improvisation in a formal theatre. Upon this basis, they can plan their actions – both intuitively as they proceed and prior to the action in pre-planning. In this manner, the participants develop the feelings of self-competence and personal worth. Thus, role-play and improvisation have a great influence towards the development of the participants' self-esteem.

Besides, both role-play and improvisation are action oriented activities and through the real experience gained on stage, the participants feel good about themselves. As compared to the element of script development and analysis, the impact towards the development of self-esteem is lesser. This is because without taking action, trying out the roles and self-experience the roles, what is

described in the script will remain as merely a script. Script analysis is only capable to provide a theoretical and background understanding of the story and characters. Therefore, the script development and analysis has the least influence towards the development of self-esteem.

#### **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The main implication of this study is that theatre appears to be a beneficial activity for the development of the youth's identity. The elements in theatre help to fill in the gap in the developmental stages of these youth and act as a suitable programme for the self-esteem development of the youth. In relations to practices, this study implies that theatre can be incorporated as a youth identity development program in Malaysia. Therefore, both the youth development organizations from the government and NGOs can put more efforts looking into theatre as a suitable youth identity development program on top of the existing developmental programs. More awareness should also be created among the youth organizations and youth officers on the benefits of theatre performance towards youth identity development of the youth identity. Unless they are aware of the scenario, incorporating theatre performance into the curriculum of youth identity development will therefore be difficult.

The result of this study also indicated that youth participating in theatre performance have developed a high level of self-esteem. Therefore, theatre is recommended to be used as a developmental program at the early stage of the youth development to provide them with a healthy environment for identity formation, as most characteristic of a person is formed at the early adolescence if not younger. This study also indicated that role-play, improvisation and characterization are the elements in the theatre performance as perceived to have the most influence towards the development of self-esteem. Therefore, this posed another implication for practice that is; more emphasis needs to be given to enhance and improve these theatre

performance elements in developing the future theatre programs. Besides theatre, these elements can also be incorporated into other youth developmental programs or classroom activities that aimed to develop youths' self-esteem.

Another implication of this study is that the involvement in arts not only will produce outcomes related to arts but the non-arts outcomes as well such as the spiritual development or character development of the youth. Therefore, future research may place importance on other arts elements such as music, dance or non-performing arts such as painting, sculpting or photography as promising agents in developing self-esteem. It is recommended that the future research can look into more challenging area regarding the sustaining effects of this development into adulthood. This is an important stream to follow the sample through into adulthood to explore the sustaining effects of the self-esteem development as a result of participating in the theatre performance. The sustaining effects of the development will depend on the strength of impact theatre has upon these youth. Therefore, future research may want to include up-close longitudinal studies of students heavily involved in theatre at the single or multiple-school level to explore continual changes. While this study focused on the self-esteem as an outcome of the theatre performance participation, there are still a number of other characteristics that may be the outcome of theatre performance and have yet to be explored. Hence, future research can look into the benefits of the theatre performance towards the development of such unexplored potential.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, theatre performance has been proven to be a beneficial activity for the youth identity development specifically the youth at the transition stages of identity versus role confusion and intimacy versus isolation. Role play, improvisation and characterization are the elements of the theatre performance that assist the youth to develop a higher self-esteem

to face life challenges and engage in problem solving in a safe and deep personal way. Theatre provides the youth with a different perspective of their lives and a chance to imagine a different outcome. Though theatre is not life, it is so meaningful to them as it reaches down into their inner self and develops their identity. Hence, in the pursuit of educating the youth and helping them develop their identity and move smoothly into fine young adults, theatre performance will help plays an important role as part of the youth identity development program.

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