Growing to Full Stature: Developing a Play Mindset Using Playback Theatre and Improvisation in Teacher Professional Development

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INTRODUCTION

Teacher professional development is essential to the quality of our children's education and their future. According to a recent OECD report (2017), effective teacher professional development involves an active group of collaborating and learning teachers. Much funding and effort goes into applying these ideas to in-service courses made available to teachers. The voices that we have been exposed to in our research (teachers participating in in-service training courses in central Israel), express many frustrations about the existing system. After a long day of work, they are expected to dedicate time and energy to study beyond teaching periods, with courses that often do not connect to or have an impact on their teaching practices. Many shared that they feel alone and lonely, coping with their students and their students' parents, fellow teachers and school administrators. Although there is a huge investment by both institutions and teachers to promote professional development, this work is one potential response toward alleviating some of the frustrations and cultivating change.

This research is based on extensive work that we have done introducing improvisation and Playback Theatre to pre and in-service teachers, principals and professors, through academic workshops and courses in Israel since 2013.

Setting - The Literature Review

We see teacher professional development as a challenge of changing mindsets one teacher at a time, offering teachers opportunities to examine and adapt their mental models of student and teacher learning (Henderson, Putt & Coombs, 2002; Strauss, 1993; Senge, 1990). We see learning as an act that integrates thinking, feeling, experiencing, embodying and reflecting. This kind of learning is possible in a collaborative learning environment that encourages agency and reflection, where failure is an essential ingredient and process is of primary import. At the heart of this learning act is Carol Dweck's 'Growth Mindset,' which encourages the idea that intelligence can grow with effort, mistakes are important and the learning process includes not mastering skills "yet" (2010). We have found that this type of mindset flourishes in a culture of play.

So what can be done to motivate teachers to reconsider, reflect and shift their mindsets within the framework of their professional development? We offer an alternative that encourages them to re-examine the way they experience their own roles as learners *first* and only then as teachers in

their classrooms. We give them opportunities to tell stories, play, act and collaborate, to perform, improvise and grow together in a safe space. This kind of learner-teacher can then begin to promote a culture of play that encourages both students and teachers to listen and respect each other, rely on one another, inquire, take chances, make mistakes, and find new ways to learn together playfully in a supportive classroom climate. We believe that this leads to what we call a *Play Mindset.*

Sociologist Erving Goffman stated in his seminal *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, that it is difficult to distinguish the ways in which our everyday actions are not, in fact, a performance. "All the world, is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't aren't easy to specify" (1959, p. 72). To redirect this statement, although teachers are not trained as actors, when they enter their classrooms, they are stepping into the spotlight, onto a stage of sorts, with pre-defined roles and scripts that they either uphold or abandon, their students either as spectators or fellow thespians. As performance theorist Richard Schechner said, "everyday life is framed and performed" (1988/2003, p. 296).

This work is based upon two similes that researchers have been examining extensively - teaching as performance (Pineau, 1994, Eisner, 1979, Whatman, 1997, Fusco, 2000) and teaching as improvisation (Sawyer, 2011, Johnstone, 1979). The simile of teaching as an improvisatory art, allows for the implementation of the principles of improvisation and leads to student-student and student-teacher collaborations and the creation and co-construction of new knowledge. We would add to these two similes, learning as an improvisation – both from the perspective of the teacher and the student.

Research has shown that teaching through performance affects the growing person in five dimensions: social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional development (Hillyard, 2010). We believe that to generate a *Play Mindset* involves creating an improvisational classroom learning culture for teachers, where they play, act and improvise together with their students. In our research we have found that teachers exposed to this kind of learning in their professional development, uncover their personal and professional perceptions about learning and motivation (Gelbart & Shahaf Barzilay, in publication). Shifts in their own mindsets inaugurate a process that can lead to changes in their actual teaching practices and increased self-efficacy for teaching by play and performance (Bandura, 2006).

Improvisation is defined as a creative act executed without planning and while listening and responding to others in real-time (Gerber 2007; Magerko, Manzoul, Riedl, Baumer, Fuller, Luther & Pearce 2009; Nachmanovitch 1990). Improvisation involves a performance that is invented on the spot by actors in response to a general subject or specific input from the audience. This leads to the creation of something unexpected, playful and surprising. Based on the ideas of Viola Spolin (1999), Keith Johnstone (1979) and others, some of the principles necessary for successful improvisation include also: playing while being in the moment; being willing to fail; saying 'Yes' to others and their ideas; saying 'Yes, and,' by contributing ideas and collaborating to create something new; listening deeply and actively; following the rules; and having fun.

Playback Theatre (PT) is an interactive form of improvisational theatre based on individuals sharing personal stories and receiving an improvised response using theatrical techniques. The actors give the storytellers a gift - seeing the story and themselves brought to life, others' perspectives within the story and the recognition that they have been seen and heard. Playback Theatre was created by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas during the mid 1970's and was influenced by their own exploration of twentieth century experiential theatre and a fascination with pre-literary storytelling and other oral cultural forms (Fox, 1992).

One of the meaningful tools that we have incorporated into our work is improvisational theatre pioneer, Keith Johnstone's concept of "status" and status games. Johnstone (1999) replaced the word "status" for dominance and submission from Konrad Lorenz's work about jackdaws . He explained the (often hidden) rules that govern all social interactions. He created a series of theatrical games that reveal the hierarchical relationships between "social animals" in every situation (Johnstone , 1979, p. 41). Playing status games "involve[s] the conscious manipulation of our level of dominance" (Johnstone, 1999, p. 219). Johnstone brought examples of three types of teachers - well-liked, but unable to cope with disciplinary issues (low status player), disliked, with strict discipline and no need to punish (high status player) and well-liked, able to discipline and no need to punish (status expert, lowering and raising status as needed) (Johnstone , 1979, pp. 35-36). He clarified that he was not referring to social status. He was referring to behaviors that could be adopted and adjusted. For example, a servant can play high status to his master's low status. Status is what he does, not who he is.

Our point of departure was Johnstone's physical descriptions of high and low status (eye contact, body language, etc.). This claim was strengthened when we came across recent research in social psychology that asserts that changing nonverbal behaviors, including high- or low-power poses, can impact performance (Cuddy, Wilmuth & Carney, 2012). We have integrated these foundational ideas into Playback Theatre workshops introduced to teachers, along with Growth Mindset, Improvisation and Status games.

The methods that we have implemented take an embodied approach to learning. Theories of Embodied Learning posit that action, movement and gesture can enhance and facilitate learning experiences (Goldin-Meadow, 2009; Macedonia & Repetto, 2017), from infancy to adulthood (Kontra, Goldin-Meadow & Beilock, 2012). An embodied educational approach raises awareness and challenges for participants to physically embody different status roles and test whether this has an impact upon their immediate and long term feelings, personal and professional identity as learners and teachers, as well as their classroom management skills.

All of these ideas and physically embodied activities encourage a revisiting and reexamination of teacher participants' mental models and encourage the creation of a *Play Mindset.* This was the foundation of our action-research.

The Plot - Methodology

The purpose of this research was to analyze participants' reactions to the games, stories, playback theatre experiences during the workshops as reported in their final assignment written reflections. Specifically for this paper, the analysis focused on the theme of status.

This research is based on the qualitative-ethnographic approach focusing on revealing the nature of social phenomena, and working with unprocessed data, that was not related to a prior closed system (Sabar Ben-Yehosua, 2001). The method of this study was a participatory action research (Elliott, 2001), examining a unique workshop for pre and in-service teacher training, developed by a facilitator-researcher and operated as part of twelve different courses. This form of research can be defined as "the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it" (ibid, p. 69). A collaborative-practical model was used.

The participants were forty-five teachers from two workshops held in a teacher professional development center in the city of Modiin, Israel during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years. Twenty-seven were in the former, and eighteen were in the latter group. They consisted of forty-two women and three men (K-12, English as a Foreign Language, History, Hebrew Language, Art, Geography, Bible, Science, Physical Education, Philosophy, to special education, intellectually gifted and mainstream populations). Each workshop was thirty hours, ten meetings of three hours. The structure of each meeting was as follows: a discussion of the materials they read and watched during the previous week, sharing if and how they implemented the ideas and techniques in their classrooms, a warm up involving improvisational games, Playback Theatre based on their own stories, followed by time to write a reflective blog about what they experienced during the lessons. This reflection was shared with the facilitator-researcher, who responded to each participant individually before the following session. Careful attention was placed on the importance of maintaining an enabling a supportive atmosphere for sharing stories and spontaneity, keeping with the traditions and rituals of Playback Theatre, in keeping with Jonathan Fox's theory of "Narrative Reticulation" (in process).

The academic workshop was developed in order to explore the impact of introducing improvisation techniques and building a Playback Theatre community in teacher professional development. It is part of a series of workshops held to fulfill B.Ed and teaching certification requirements in English departments, as well as teacher professional development since 2013.
The workshop aimed to raise awareness and develop their body language; performing skills; strengthen their self-efficacy through play; and nurture versatile perspectives towards good teaching practices and learning.

These workshops were held by the facilitator-researcher (Gelbart) and the data analysis was conducted with a co-researcher (Shahaf Barzilay). Both researchers are playbackers since 2008 and group-leaders and workshop facilitators mainly in Teacher and Higher Education.

The research question was to what extent do participants understand and assimilate the concept of status in their professional lives as a result of the workshop.

The analysis method used was content analysis (Strauss, 1987) of the reflective blogs and their summary in a final assignment. The basic unit of analysis was an expression (utterance). At the open coding phase, we examined the various documents carefully in order to identify repeated themes that related to the research question. This enabled "thick description" of the variables in the specific context in which they occur (Geertz, 1990).
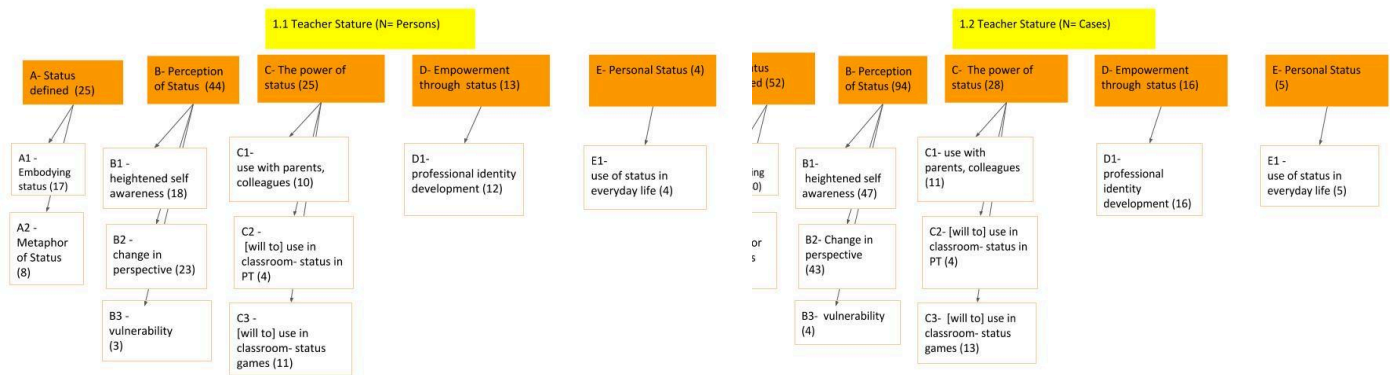
The validation process was conducted through cross-checking by two researchers (triangulation), and presenting evidence from different sources (blogs, final assignments, facilitator-researcher diary). The analysis process raised comparable and contrasting data reinforcing speculation that arose regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen & Manion, 1989). This process raised points of difference, agreement and non-agreement between the fellow researchers and in relation to the academic theories (performance theory, social and cognitive psychology, teacher professional development).

Themes - Findings and Discussion: Teachers Find Voices and Share Insights

The qualitative analysis revealed a model that we call "*Teacher Stature.*" We have broadened Johnstone's use of the concept, "status." We have found that teachers with stature have respect *for* and the respect *of* those that surround them. This is an outcome of a learning process that encourages play.

 "*Teacher Stature*" includes five main categories and ten sub-categories: (a) Status definitions; (b) Perceptions of Status; (c) The Power of Status; (d) Empowerment through Status ; (e) Personal Status. These emerged from the experiences reported in the teacher's reflective blogs and final assignments. Figure 1.1 represents the quantitative analysis - the frequency of each sub-category in terms of the number of teachers (sum of 45 persons) and Figure 1.2 represents the analysis in terms of the number of references (sum of 195 cases).

Figure 1.1 -1.2:Teacher Stature -A model developed in teacher PT workshops

1.1 Teacher Stature (N= Persons)

- A- Status defined (25)
  - A1 - Embodying status (17)
  - A2 - Metaphor of Status (8)
- B- Perception of Status (44)
  - B1 - heightened self awareness (18)
  - B2 - change in perspective (23)
  - B3 - vulnerability (3)
- C- The power of status (25)
  - C1- use with parents, colleagues (10)
  - C2 - [will to] use in classroom- status in PT (4)
  - C3 - [will to] use in classroom- status games (11)
- D- Empowerment through status (13)
  - D1- professional identity development (12)
- E- Personal Status (4)
  - E1- use of status in everyday life (4)

1.2 Teacher Stature (N= Cases)

- A- Status ...ed (52)
- B- Perception of Status (94)
  - B1- heightened self awareness (47)
  - B2- Change in perspective (43)
  - B3- vulnerability (4)
- C- The power of status (28)
  - C1- use with parents, colleagues (11)
  - C2- [will to] use in classroom- status in PT (4)
  - C3- [will to] use in classroom- status games (13)
- D- Empowerment through status (16)
  - D1- professional identity development (16)
- E- Personal Status (5)
  - E1 - use of status in everyday life (5)

"…It happened when I entered an elementary school class that didn't know me. They were noisy and I asked for quiet. They didn't listen. I realized that something was wrong with what I was doing. I took a few moments to be silent, and I let my instincts kick in. I stood up straight with my legs apart, my hands on my hips. I spoke quietly and assertively, with the knowledge that I am taking the reins of control back. It surprised me greatly when the children became quiet. I regained my balance and haven't lost it again since." (Teacher 8)

This story, told at an advanced stage of the workshop, revealed some key elements of status as identified by a teacher as a tool for teacher professional development. During the workshops, they were using status games and playing back stories about attaining and losing status at work and in their personal lives. They heightened their awareness of the use of their bodies and their students' bodies in personal and school-related interactions. The analysis revealed (see Figure 1.2) that the majority of the *definitions of status (A)* are related to *embodying status (a1)* including posture (how one stands), breathing, the position of shoulders, the way one walks, direct or indirect eye contact, voice pitch, whole body movement, etc.

Many shared how surprised they were by the ease with which they were able to implement what they had learned by being introduced to, playing games with and doing Playback Theatre about status. During their participation they described it "like flipping a switch." Here is an example of one teacher's application of embodying status with her 3rd grade Special Education class: "...at one point during the lesson, they were humiliating each other and acting out. I decided to teach them about status. At first, it was very difficult for them to understand what I meant. So we worked on eye contact and walking with high and low status postures and slowly but surely, they found ways to express how they felt." (Teacher 7)

The teachers used a variety of *metaphors and similes (a2)* to describe their experience of being exposed to PT and specifically to the use of simple body cues in the workshop and in their classrooms. For example, they said, it felt like gaining a new pair of eyes to see the world, like putting on armor to protect themselves, like wearing a mask, like regaining control of a runaway horse's reins, like playing a game. Many teachers felt that status games worked like magic on them and on their students, by raising everyone's awareness and confidence. The use of the metaphor "lens" informs the transformative quality of the process they experienced: "When you see the world through the lens of status, you understand the importance of emitting confidence and power when every situation becomes a potential arena for exposed and hidden power struggles.

> Because what you emit to the outside world, also gets transmitted inwards to you." (Teacher 44)
> Many began adapting and directing their efforts toward contributing to their students' growth as a group and as individuals: "I am bringing Status (games, etc) to my students and it is amazing. It is like magic." (Teacher 40)
> "After talking to him (a Special ED student who always had his head swallowed by his shoulders, who barely spoke, who was so introverted) about the significance of his body language, he began sitting straight, smiling and participating. This type of change has not been reported by other teachers yet." (Teacher 32)

We see this as part of a learning model that lays embodiment as a foundation for learning (Freiler, 2008). This model accentuates the need for teachers to first discover with their bodies what they will later introduce to their students. This is supported by the metaphors and similes teachers used in their written reflections and was triggered by the introduction of Keith Johnstone's work on status and Amy Cuddy's research into the impact of nonverbal communication, followed by two sessions dedicated to status games.

Beyond definitions of status, we found the category of *Changing Perceptions of Status (B)* to be one of the strongest (n=94 cases) in this research – almost everyone in the sample related to this theme (n=44), as seen in Figure 1. Participants adopted Johnstone's (1979) term "status expert,"

as the skill of lowering and raising one's status. A status expert is described by participants as a teacher who relaxes and lets go, "When I decide to play high status, everyone changes!" (Teacher 10) They reported effectively using power cues and relaxing during conflictual circumstances. The ability to play the "see-saw" (Johnstone, 1979, 1999) and consciously raise and lower their status is one of the powerful communicative skills that they gained. "Often I feel that it is just a matter of me deciding - now I'll transmit high status! Even when I feel no self-confidence in a situation, I see that I get an immediate response that makes me feel confident." (Teacher 44) Thus the perception of status is strongly related to *heightened self-awareness (b1)* "I went through a meaningful process of noticing how I feel when standing in front of others." (Teacher 45). Some of them have come to the conclusion that they can examine their habitual use of status and change it relatively easily:
"I know myself as a dominant person, I express strong opinions and am assertive when necessary. I feel comfortable talking loudly and don't care about social and work hierarchies.   It has been interesting for me to change my automatic response - to lower my voice and experience myself from a different angle (Teacher 43)."

This *change in perspective (b2)* was also apparent in teacher-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-principal and teacher-parent interactions. They reported discovering the use of body language as part of their performance. Teachers realized they could use status instead of force: "Status neutralizes power struggles and dominance in the teachers' room. Now that I am aware of it, I am no longer influenced by others' power plays." (Teacher 33)

Alongside their increased awareness of status, we were pleased to find several indications of *vulnerability (b3),* which we consider an essential aspect of *Teacher Stature*: "Status games (going from high to low) clarified the role of status in my lack of confidence and allowed me to look at teachers and identify what I want to learn and become." (Teacher 12) They often related to the process of self-exposure they went through by choosing to share their own status stories in the workshops. They felt safe and empowered by doing so in this PT setting where the ritual was kept and an ethic of caring and respect was developed.

Our conceptualization of *Teacher Stature* aligns and furthers Brene Brown's (2012) research into vulnerability, shame and wholeheartedness. Her theories, based on interviews with women, connected directly to the feelings of powerlessness that the participant teachers (mostly women) expressed about their daily professional challenges. In the process of telling stories in the PT setting and improvising, we believe they have correlated correlated teacher vulnerability with *Teacher Stature*.

The power of Status (c) was a very strong theme in their writing, relating to *the use of status with parents or colleagues (c1)*. Teachers became more aware of power relations and struggles,

and they detected their use of status cues in order to lower or raise their status. They related their ability to feel powerful and act with confidence to their new knowledge: "After learning about status, I had a phone conversation with parents. Just by straightening my spine and pulling my shoulders back, I spoke with more confidence." (Teacher 41)

They also developed techniques that bring *status games (c2)*, the sharing of personal *stories and Playback Theatre into their classrooms (c3)*. Twenty-four teachers related to the implementation of status in their school work, indicating their belief in the contribution of status to their professional lives.They strongly connected this to classroom management issues:

> "Now that I'm aware of the body language of high status, I can play with it to get my students' attention and use it as issues develop in real time in the classroom."
> (Teacher 8)
> "This is true for my most challenging classrooms as well. I bring high status with me everywhere I go. It helps me to maintain order and discipline even in difficult classes."
> (Teacher 31)

Empowerment through status (D) is the effect PT workshops have on teachers. They were invited to share stories relating to themes of low or high status, when they were students, teachers or in their life experience in general. This was then played back to broaden their perspectives about difficult situations, and emerged in their writings as a part of their p*rofessional identity development (d1)*. They heard themselves telling stories and saw themselves on stage, shifting between high and low statuses and discovered its importance to them as teachers: "When I was role-playing a parent, I found myself playing low status to my partner-teacher's high status in a way that would never happen. My partner and I laughed at my absurd and inauthentic response to the situation...As a teacher I would never lower my status with a student or a parent, without good reason." (Teacher 2)

This exemplifies the participant teachers' identity development as "skilled performer[s]" who has "three halves" - the "observer," the "knower" and the "feeler" (Schechner, 1988/2003). The observer teacher remains a witness, aware of her interactions with her students and with herself. She is able to measure the threat, search for learning opportunities, without losing her connection to the knower and the feeler.

Moving beyond professional development, *personal status (E)* was also part of their learning experience, they brought examples of the *use of status in everyday life (e1)*. They played status games with their spouses and other family members and shared what they learned about status. Here we see teachers demonstrating at home Schechner's notion that "everyday life is framed and performed" (1988/2003, p. 296).

In sum, as a result of these workshops and courses, participants have begun adopting a *Play Mindset* as part of their teacher persona and in their teaching practices, adapting these methods to their lesson aims and goals on a regular basis. Imagine our surprise when we discovered that one of the after-effects teachers began to report was that these practices led to improved classroom management skills, classroom climates and teacher-student, student-student collaboration and communication. We believe that the rule-oriented nature of play contributes greatly to effective teaching. Further research and exploration is essential in order to address this pedagogical challenge within the context of Playback Theatre and Improvisation.

Summary - "*Teacher Stature*"

This research is based on six years of bringing PT and Improvisation to in and pre service teachers, specifically in-service teachers participating in courses over the last two years in the city of Modiin as part of their professional development requirement.

Our analysis has led to the emergence of what we call **"*Teacher Stature*."**
According to our findings, teachers with stature have respect for and the respect of those that surround them. The five categories that emerged were (a) Status definitions; (b) Perceptions of Status; (c) The power of Status; (d) Empowerment through Status ; (e) Personal Status. These were the result of the experiences reported in the teacher's reflective blogs and final assignments.

When teachers undergo this kind of learning experience (even during a 30 hour course), they begin to *dare* to integrate these new values and practices into their teaching: being in the 'here and now,' playfulness, creativity, fun, being open to the unexpected, saying 'yes, and,' celebrating the process, perceiving mistakes as part of a learning approach. This theory and practice of *Teacher Stature,* introduces an embodied educational approach that raises physical awareness. In such a classroom learning culture, storytelling, listening deeply, collaborating and following the rules become a central organizing element in the curriculum design, and are the order of the day.

Thus, developing a *Play Mindset* becomes an integral aspect of "*Teacher Stature*." Teachers playing and acting with students, bringing games and sharing stories- all contribute to a sense of magic. They have begun to see themselves as facilitators of their students' development of body image, communication skills, and self- efficacy.

One workshop participant quoted the poet, Antonio Machado, in order to describe the power of his experience, "Traveler, there is no path. The path is made by walking."

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