

Puppetry As A Platform For Body Safety Awareness Campaign

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on how puppetry is used as a communication platform to send out key messages to primary school children from the age of 7 to 12 years old on body safety awareness. This Action Research was done through a Communication Media Studies Course in the School of Communication and Creative Arts, KDU UC to investigate how the use of puppetry is able to create awareness in body safety among primary school students. Communicating about body safety towards children has always been an issue due to the topic that is related to their private parts. This topic has been recognised as taboo for both parents and teachers in Malaysia although the issue of perpetrators on sexual grooming or child grooming has been rising in the country. Ten students from each session were selected by the teachers and consented by the parents for a face to face interview to get their impression on the puppet shows and whether they had understood the message sent out by the puppet theatre performance. The sessions were recorded through a voice recorder. We found that the students were positively and emphatically inclined towards the stories written by us about what constitutes sexual inappropriateness and highly understood the specific strategies to help them avoid or cope with bad situations

Keywords: School children 7-12 in Malaysia, puppetry, body safety campaign, sexual inappropriateness

INTRODUCTION

This study focused on how puppetry can be used as a communication platform to send out key messages to primary school children from the age of 7 to 12 years old on body safety awareness in the light of recent concerns and statistics on sexual offences on young kids in the country.

BACKGROUND

This study came about after child sexual abuse was recognized by the country as a very serious and prevalent problem affecting countries all over the world. The Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development for Malaysia revealed that a study had found a shocking 20,000 sexual abuse cases involving children in the country. Most disturbing finding according to her was that a good number of the sexual offenders were often adults close to the children (i.e., family members and religious teachers) (The Malaysian Insight, 2018). Despite widespread

efforts to spread awareness and campaign for better laws, there still are not enough policies that effectively protect these vulnerable young children.

A Non-Governmental Organisation, Johor Women's League advocating against child sexual abuse through its *Tindak Demi Anak Kita* (TinDAK) campaign since 2016 reported that a total of 22,134 children were sexually abused from 2010 to May 2017, and over half the number were victims of rape. The spokeswoman for TinDAK, Thanam said the highest number of rape cases involving children occurred in Johor, the southern state in Malaysia, with 2,089 cases recorded.

Statistics by the Selangor Police revealed that 75.7 percent of cases involving sexual crimes against children that were reported in Selangor since January this year were committed by persons known to the victims. Selangor Criminal Investigation Department head AC Fadzil Ahmat said the sexual predators known to the victims were either the father or stepfather, grandfather, older brother, babysitter's husband or son, neighbour or mother's boyfriend. He said the statistics also showed an increase in the number of cases, to 333 cases from 287 cases during the corresponding period last year.

A seminar on creating awareness on child sexual abuse cases was held where the City Chief Police Officer Datuk Mohamad Salleh told more than 500 primary school and kindergarten teachers hospitals and counsellors that many cases were not brought to the attention of the authorities also because of the shame and embarrassment which the victims and their families were likely to endure.

He added that between 2009 and 2011, 114 child sexual abuse reports were lodged with the police here. In the first six months of this year, police received 10 reports. He admitted that there are more cases which had gone unreported due to shame and embarrassment or simply because of apathy and indifference.

Protect and Save The Children Association of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur (P.S. The Children) head of training Elizabeth Gnanapragasam raised the four core steps towards prevention of child sexual abuse. She urged adults concerned with raising children to talk about it, prevent opportunity, recognise the signs and react responsibly. She advised parents to let their child know from young, no one should touch their private parts. They should be taught to say 'No' she added.

Child grooming crimes has been one of the country's main problems due to the crime increase in rate over the years. As stated in Unicef Report (2010), child abuse had increased to 700 cases between 2006 -2008.

Based on the concerns above, we decided to empower the kids themselves rather than wait for authorities and parents to solve their problems through a campaign on body awareness. This study initiated an Action Research through a Communication Media Campaign Course in the School of Communication and Creative Arts to investigate how the use of puppetry and puppet shows can create awareness in body safety to primary school students. According to Alhooli and Alshammari (2009), the use of story and puppet shows are the best teaching tool to children and also one method to convey good behaviour and moral values for teachers and kindergarten teachers. Our target is of course young children and perhaps can create awareness among their teachers and parents who see the shows.

Puppetry

Puppets have been used by educators as a pedagogical tool is a unique way to provide a different educational learning experience for preschool children. According to Loy Chee Luen (2011) the use of puppets is to encourage children to express their feeling, interacting with other children and to help them to improve their intrapersonal and interpersonal skill.

A source which addresses puppetry in educational setting is the collection of articles in *Puppetry in Education and Therapy* (O'Hara, Judith, Bernice, Matthew. Editors, 2005). In an article, "The Puppet as Metaphor," (p.8) the writer Ackerman stresses that puppetry, an inherently performance-based media, can be powerful tool for literacy development and language development.

Korosec (2013) in her classroom research found that when using puppets in class, it is very important for the teacher to determine the goals of the puppet project. If the goal is education, the puppet becomes a medium for expressing the child's understanding of the world, literature, nature, social relations. And during a drama creativity, the puppet will be used as a medium for communication and personal interaction.

Roselina, K.J (2014) in "*Learning through Dramatic Arts*" at the 2nd National Conference of Knowledge Transfer (KTP 02) found that puppets can catch children's attention easily, create a non-threatening and warm atmosphere, motivate students to speak, allow more interaction and provide more exposure and thus provide a platform for a lot of discussions on any topic.

Besides that, puppet theatre also acts as a communication platform towards refugee kids as a therapy. As the refugee kids went through such trauma in their life to be able to escape from such tragedies makes them very lucky however, they may still be affected by the incident. Puppets then acts as a platform for the to communicate better due to the puppet make the freeform inhibition and making them more relaxed and make the to be much stable mentally and emotionally. As cited by Astles (2012), puppets are widely used in the refugee settlements as a form of entertainment, mostly targeted to children and to provide them with some respite away from the harsh daily condition that they are going through. This has created campaign where a few puppets performances were flying to Bosnia, West Sahara, Eritrea, and Somalia making puppets a communication medium through creating puppet performances and puppet workshop with the refugee children.

On another perspective, puppets can be used as a medium to talk about taboo or shameful subjects as it has been used in the UK on sexual health purposes. This was accepted due to puppets is a medium which makes it less awkward to talk about it due to an object figure that is animating the whole narrative compared to using human actors to act out about the subject. According to Astles (2012), puppets are used to communicate about the serious issue of erectile dysfunction at a group of daycare in Exeter in a humorous narrative making the topic of the issue to be lightened and accepted by the audiences. This shows that puppet definitely acts as an impactful communication platform as the message that needs to be sent out is received well despite the topic to be a taboo or sensitive to talk about.

THE BODY AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

Communicating about body safety towards children has always been an issue due to the topic that is related to their private parts has been recognised as a taboo for both parents and teachers. As the issue of perpetrators on sexual grooming or child grooming is rising in Malaysia, the Body Safety Campaign was held in three schools in Selangor. The campaign used

puppet theatre and puppets in order to bring awareness on safe and unsafe touches towards primary school children.

As puppets tend to have various communication factors such as education, entertainment and information, this research focused on how puppets played an important role to educate selected primary school students on Body Safety Awareness.

Topics covered in the Campaign

The safe touch and the unsafe touch.33

Conversation on body parts towards children has always been a taboo for parents in Malaysia as it is considered private information. This causes the children to not understand where the safe and unsafe touches and resulted to them being abused wrongly by perpetrators. According to statistics in Malaysia, one in three girls and one in six boys were assaulted before their 18th birthday (Body Safety Education, 2019). This shows, the case of children who were abused wrongly is a serious matter.

The former Chief Minister of Penang, Lim Guan Eng stated that the percentage of parents who acknowledge their children were touched was only 30 percent and the number of pedophile responsible for child abuse were 453 with each of them responsible to the average of 148 children. Thus, by having a Body Safety campaign will increase the awareness on safe and unsafe touches towards children preventing them from being abused and assaulted by perpetrators.

Sexual grooming:

We felt that this is an important topic as if kids were not taught since little they can easily fall victims to sexual grooming which is a tactic used by sexual predators to their future prey. Sexual grooming occurs when a person builds an emotional relation towards a child to gain their trust with the purpose to abuse and exploit them sexually also allow trafficking to occur (National Security for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2019). This occurrence could happen when children or teenagers through face to face contact or even online communication with the person that can be known as stranger or it can also be their own family members as the groomers are like walks in sheep's clothing.

The cause that brought the attention of sexual grooming is when The Star R.AGE made a documentary on sexual grooming in social media and suggested that the government should implement anti grooming law. The documentary started with explaining on what causes grooming to occur, having interview the victim of sexually abused also to the journalist to undercover as a teenager to experience how the perpetrators talk to their prey in order for them to sexually exploit the child. One of the victims responded in the interview that she was victimised since she was at the young age of 12 years old with the first man who was 17 years old that she met through WeChat, later on they were caught and they were asked to stop while the second man she was victimised caused her to be pregnant at the age of 14 that led her to be with a shelter home for sexually abused girls. She even continued by stating that she never knew that sexual intercourse could led her to be pregnant as most of the time she was forced to perform the act by the predators.

Sexual Abuse

Includes any contacts or interactions between a child and an adult in which the child is used for sexual gratification of the adult or other perpetrator. The child may be a willing or unwilling partner to the interaction. Sexual abuse may also be committed by another child if

the child is significantly older than the victim or when the abuser is in a position of power or control over the victim.

The situation is examined and ways that the child being in the position can address the problem are explored. Ways in which children who witness teasing or sexual bullying behavior can respond to help diffuse the situation can also be addressed. Following the presentation, the puppeteers answered questions via the puppets from the audience and asked students to share their ideas. The aim was to:

- Answer their questions honestly—tell the child what they wanted to know using words they can understand
- Give correct information.
- Start conversations—some children never ask about sexual health
- Share our beliefs, concerns and value as we believed that the child needs to know where we as adults and storytellers stand.

Our stories were written with the aim to educate children about what constitutes sexual inappropriateness, provide specific strategies to help children avoid or cope with bad situations. The overall campaign included four new skits in which the puppets share their personal experiences with sexual inappropriateness.

Three types of puppet shows were performed: A discursive narrative puppet theatre which was narrated in a straightforward manner, called Safe Touches, STOP, RUN and TELL and Good Touch and Bad Touch.

Two songs were introduced called, 'My Body Belongs to Me' and 'The STOP' song which was symbolically performed by the puppets.

Objective of Study

The general objective of this study is to determine the impact of puppet theatre as an education platform towards lower primary school children based on the child grooming prevention theme.

- i. To identify how puppetry can be used to communicate key messages to the primary school children.
- ii. To identify the factors that can be used to communicate using puppet to educate primary school children.
- iii. To what extent is the effectiveness of puppet theatre as a communication platform towards primary school - children.

METHODOLOGY

This is an Action Research which used primary qualitative method through interview to collect data.. Randomly selected students from each session were picked by the teachers and consented to by the parents.

As the researchers joined the practitioners during the Body Safety Awareness campaign, the researchers were also able to learn the perspective of the puppet show's audiences by being present during the puppet shows.

The programme was informed by the researchers to the school teachers prior to the campaign. Students were interviewed in regards to their impression on the puppet show and how much they understood the message sent out by the puppet theatre performance. The respondents

had a face to face interview and the sessions were recorded through a voice recorder. Interview questions were employed to answer the research questions.

Locale

In collecting the data, a few primary schools around Selangor, Malaysia were selected as the locale of this study. More specifically the location in which the interview was conducted were at Sekolah Kebangsaan Petaling Jaya, Sekolah Kebangsaan Sri Petaling and Bukit Bintang Boys School, SK Sri Damai. The four schools had accepted the puppet shows to be performed to their students after being approached a month prior to the execution date.

Research Participants

The research is specifically focused on primary school student as there will be lower primary school kids of the age of 7 to 9 years old and upper primary which of 10 to 12 years old. This study had used the simple random sampling.

Research Instrument

During the interview process, the respondents were asked for the parent's consent before recording the interview. They had to answer seven questions. The style of the interview was open ended in order for the children to give details of their experience from the puppet shows. The primary objective of the interview was to observe the response of the students if they understood the message sent out by the puppet shows. The students who were interviewed consist of 10 boys and 7 girls from the three schools the morning sessions and 10 lower all-boy primary school children. In the evening session.

Data Gathering Procedures

In order to support this descriptive research, the relevant information must be collected in order to understand the effectiveness of puppet show as an effective communication platform towards children. For the data to be collected, this study must pass through these procedures:

1. Requested permission from supervisor to conduct the interviews based on the above research instrument.
2. Requested permission from the schools and parents respondents before proceeding with the interview
3. Conducted the interview on the day of the campaign.
4. Collected data via voice recordings were recorded
5. Tabulating the data collected from the interview recorded were transcribed.
6. The key point of the study were identified and the data were analysed based on the research objectives.

Treatment of Data

The data gathered from the interviews were transcribed and interpreted by descriptive data treatment.

Research Ethics

During the execution of the interview, the researchers followed a series of research ethics or code of conduct, which is consent and confidentiality in order to make sure the smooth conduct of the interview session. Consent is the main concern to conduct this research. It is important to ask for the schools request before heading there in order to use the school space for the campaign to be held. Besides the school consent it is important to get the interviewees consent before recording their voice for this research purposes.

FINDINGS

Below are the research questions:

- i. How can puppetry be used to communicate key messages to the primary school children?
- ii. What are the factors which can be communicated using puppetry to educate primary school children?
- iii. To what extent can puppetry be an effective communication platform towards primary school children?

This research used interviews in order to obtain the outcome based on the relation to these research questions. Data collected was via semi-structured interview; some of the questions were open ended and others close ended as the response were limited to specific keywords. As the information that was transmitted may sound sensitive and still a taboo topic in Malaysia, puppets acted as suitable medium to communicate by educating the children on Body Safety in order for them to protect themselves.

The first question was a general question of whether any of them had watched a puppet show before. All had answered none had watched live performances. Two had seen them on television.

Question: Is it important to know about body safety using puppets?

A question was asked in order to know if the children understood the overall message sent out by the puppet shows on Body Safety Awareness.

According to the responses from the morning session, 10 of the students answered "Yes" and the other three students answered "No". These three students did not find the message clear after watching the puppet show A. The reason for this could be due to some of the students were sitting quite far from the Puppet stage for them to be able to actually observe despite the LCD screen was used to be displayed.

The answers show that some of the messages given out by the puppet did not successfully manage to create a full understanding from Puppet Show A. While the message given through Puppet Show B was fully understood by all 10 students interviewed in the evening session.

Question: Do you think you learn more about body safety through the use of puppets?

To a question whether they think they have learned more about body safety through the use of puppets, the result shows that the primary school students strongly agree that puppet can and should be used to educate them on the body safety awareness topic. However, as the question is an open ended question, some of the students did not seem to have much to explain or elaborate on why it was important to know about the topic based on the puppet show that was performed in their school.

For Puppet Show A, three students added that she believed that with the education provided by the puppets, this will help to keep them away from bad people as the bad people could impact harm towards their emotions and self-esteem.

All students who saw Puppet Show B agreed that the puppet show had educated them on Body Safety. All students agreed that it is important for students to receive Body Safety education and it was helpful that it came through the puppets.

To a question: Where is the safe touch and where is the unsafe touch?

For this question, the objective is to know whether the children could list out the important details of body safety by listing out the safe and unsafe area. As part of the puppet shows the message was passed through to the students. The keywords that will be focusing for the unsafe touches are Chest, Breast, Penis, Vagina and Bottom. However a majority of them find it still a taboo to mention the accurate scientific word for their private areas which cause them to call it genitals or even just pointing nearby the private area and avoiding to mention it.

Most of the students are able to answer the private areas that are considered safe and unsafe touches. Although, not all of the private areas were mentioned as most find it too shy to mention it

The majority of the primary school students managed to answer well when asked where the safe and unsafe touches are. As the common keywords for safe touches were hands, hair, shoulders and one answered leg. While the unsafe touches were backside, front-side referring to chest and genitals.

One student could not manage to answer the questions. He was still confused on the specific body parts. When asked in detail on which part of the body is unsafe touches, he mentioned the left side of the body.

So although puppets could convey messages well to some students, there will be some who still need to be given more personal attention.

Question: If someone tries to touch your private areas that person will be known as bad person or good person?

All of the students are able to detect the person as bad if they try to touch their private parts.

Question: What should you do if a bad person tries to touch your private areas?

To know how the student understood the tactics shown in the puppet show when it comes to protecting themselves from the bad person. The key words for this question should be Stop, Run and Tell. Which means saying stop toward the bad person who is the perpetrator, run away from the perpetrator and tell the situation to the person whom student trust.

All the students understood well on how to protect themselves from the perpetrators as taught by the puppet show. As the majority of the students replied well by making sure they will stop the situation from happening and inform the situation to the people they trust. Even though, the messages were passed through during the puppet show, some of the students recalled the message due to the songs provided in between the puppet show as the lyrics contained steps on protecting themselves from the perpetrators.

Question: Who is the person that you should trust to tell about the bad person?

The last question from this interview focuses on who should be in their trust contact when it comes to reporting on perpetrators that disturbed them the puppet show narrative focus on the segment called circle of love where they taught the children on who should be their trusted contacts.

All too often students have the same keyword which was parents, while some added more by stating teachers and family relatives are in their trust contact.

CONCLUSION

After all the findings were analysed, this study came on a few statements on how puppetry could be an effective communication platform towards primary school students. Below is the conclusion that has been obtained from this study.

- i. The information on Body Safety in the puppet shows act as an important factor of communication to the primary school children.
- ii. Fun learning using puppet shows is an effective communication platform to send across to disseminate importance on serious matter.
- iii. The symbols used in one puppet show was proven to be applicable on puppets as a communication platform as the children use the symbol of police from the character called Inspector Judy as one of their trusted contacts.

Our stories were written with the aim to educate children about what constitutes sexual inappropriateness and provide specific strategies to help children avoid or cope with bad situations.

As mentioned earlier by Korosec (2013), puppet play is a good motivating medium for enriching children's potential emotionally and socially as the child is able to participate in the puppet's situation and way of thinking.

This study not only act as a good platform to understand the function of puppets better among children but also for future project on using puppets as medium to communicate on taboo topics. The result clearly shows that the majority of students understood well on who to contact if they are being disturbed by their perpetrators. As most of them put their parents first in the contact list while one of them believes that police are their trusted contact due to the message from the puppet show they watched prior to the interview.

At the end of the puppet shows, students were positively and emphatically were inclined towards the stories of the puppet show, they were able to understand the dangerous scenario of child sexual abuse.

Puppet theatre will not only be known for future researchers as a pedagogical tool to learn the language or speaking, but also as an effective communication platform on bringing awareness to children regarding taboo subjects. As researchers, this first step of our Action Research paved the way for a more future Body Awareness Campaigns using puppetry.

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