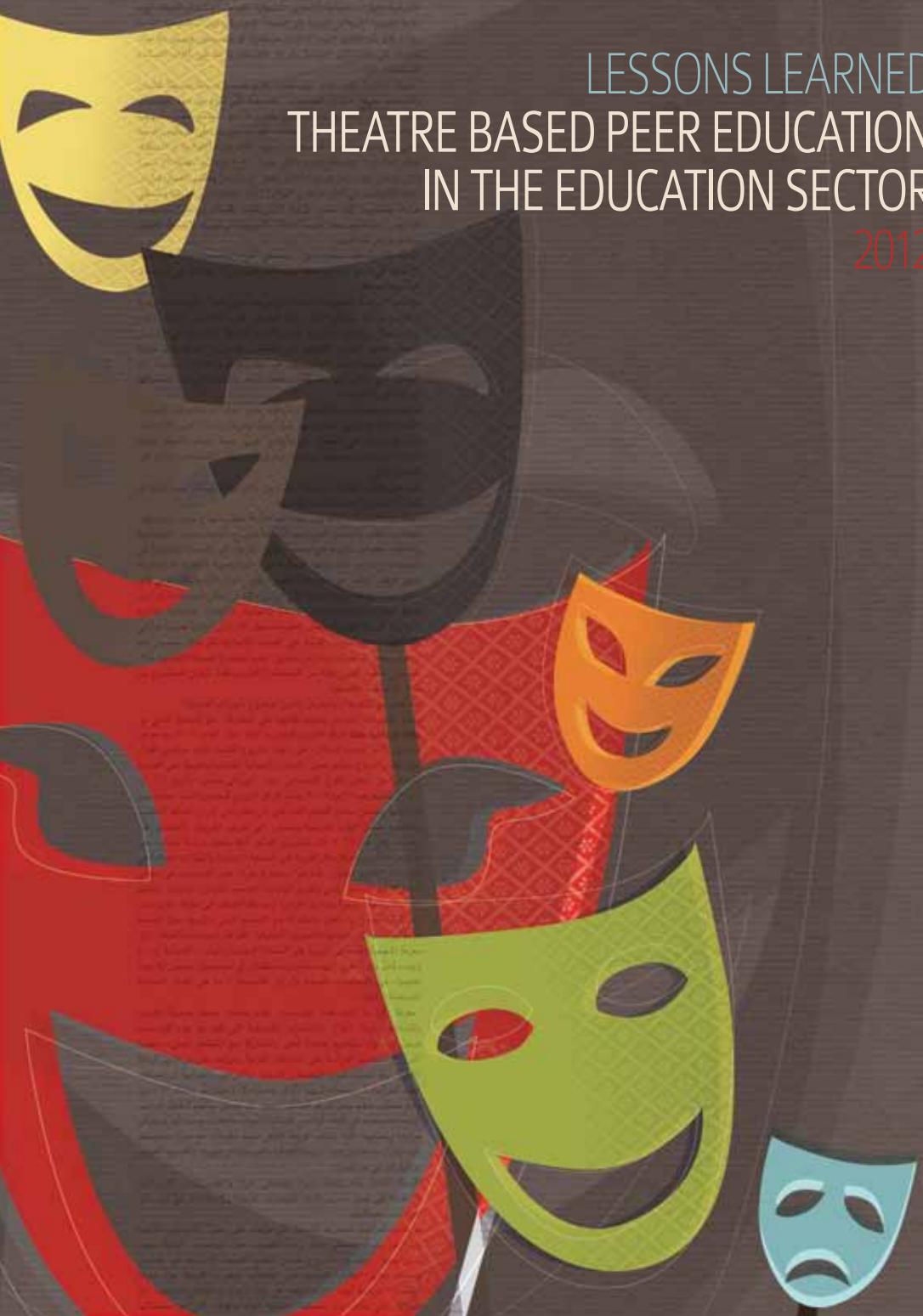


LESSONS LEARNED THEATRE BASED PEER EDUCATION IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

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WHAT IS THEATER BASED PEER EDUCATION?

The term *Theater Based Peer Education (TBPE)* refers to the use of theatre performed by peers to other peers for educational purposes. It is a theatrical means to bridge between education and entertainment (edutainment).

In *TBPE*, the use of theater is beyond the sole entertainment of audience, aiming to change knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors (or the three) of the targeted group. Peer to peer education takes advantage of the natural tendency for youth to learn from each other, since adolescence is usually the time when the importance of peers tends to replace the previous importance of the family.

The use of *TBPE* in a school setting to address health issues has been recognized both in practice and in research for its ability to more effectively address sensitive issues in a “non-threatening” way as compared to the formal educational context. That is why

TBPE is most commonly used to address sensitive topics such as puberty, drug use, sexual health, and sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

THE PROCESS

1. Training teachers on *TBPE* techniques and increasing their knowledge on topics of interest.
2. The trained teachers teach a group of students on *TBPE* techniques and increase knowledge on topics of interest.
3. Trained students develop short plays of specific topics and health education messages.
4. Trained students perform the plays to their peers and engage in an open discussion and education on the topic.
5. An open discussion is facilitated by a peer or health educator to ensure accurate knowledge transfer to students.



SAMPLE OF TBPE INITIATIVES

UNFPA Lebanon in partnership with the Visual and Performing Arts Association (VAPA) – a local NGO - and the Education Center for Research and Development (ECDR) / Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) in Lebanon adopted the *TBPE* approach to increase the knowledge of students' on topics of interest including sexual and reproductive health (SRH). The UNFPA-supported pilot initiatives were implemented in 2010 with private schools and in 2011 with public schools.

In the first pilot initiative, a total of 68 students between the ages of 15 and 19 years along with 10 teachers from 4 private schools were trained on theatre techniques and were provided with knowledge on topics of SRH. The facilitators were from the Y-PEERs. In the end, 4 plays were produced (one in each school) and 600 students watched and engaged in interactive discussions on various topics during 11 performances of these plays. Topics from the participating schools included HIV/AIDS misconceptions around transmission, violence (including bullying and domestic violence), communication with parents, substance abuse, smoking water pipe and cigarettes.

The second pilot initiative project was to replicate the 2010 approach within the activities of the public schools. In 2011, a series of workshops took place to develop the capacities for 14 teachers and trainers from ECRD's Continuous Education Program and the MEHE health education department in Saida and Zahle followed by 6 workshops for 80 students. The trained students developed at least 6 theatrical performances in the different participating schools and performed them to their peers, targeting around 200 students. Topics from the participating schools included early marriage, substance abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, and water pipe smoking.

EVALUATION OF TBPE PROJECTS

Interesting outcomes were reported as a result of the two pilotes initiatives, which encouraged UNFPA to better understand the process of TBPE, the facilitators, barriers and limitations of the process, as well as the impact of *TBPE* when applied in the Lebanese education context.

As such, a research team from the American University of Beirut conducted an evaluation to:

“Diagnose and evaluate the facilitators and key promotive factors as well as the problems, limitations and challenges faced by the different schools in implementing the TBPE approach on the one hand; and perceived impact, cost, quality, and acceptability to schools and students on the other.”

Based on the main findings of the evaluation, a set of practical recommendations and feasible alternatives for improving the edutainment approach in schools were suggested to help ensure positive changes for schools that decide to incorporate *TBPE* within its school system in the future.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

The results of the evaluation showed that the general experience of *TBPE* among the different target groups (principals, teachers and students) was positive, with further indication that the benefits/advantages of *TBPE* far outweighed its costs/disadvantages.

Several positive changes of the project (change in knowledge, skills and attitudes) were revealed based on the view points of the different groups:

1. Teachers who were trained (as facilitators and trainers)
2. Students who were trained (as actors)
3. Students who watched the play

Some of the main positive changes are summarized in the following table.

TARGET GROUPS	POSITIVE EFFECTS
<p>Teachers as facilitators and trainers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Became more flexible “loosened up” when dealing with students and adapting the newly learned techniques to accommodate students with different backgrounds — Improved facilitation skills — Became a better team player — Traditional hierarchy between teachers and students broken
<p>Students as actors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Improved communication skills — Increased assertiveness — Decreased shyness — Increased acting skills — Increased self-confidence; more believe in themselves — Increased tolerance

TARGET GROUPS

POSITIVE EFFECTS

Students as actors

- Became more compassionate “learn how to feel with others”
- Increased personal resilience
- Increased knowledge, more positive attitudes on health related and life-skills related issues
- Became a resource person and/or a resource team
- Gained more quality friends and thus social support system improved
- Support provided to other people in the community and at school
- Felt included within the school mainstream
- Learned by doing and not just by knowing/watching
- Decreased risky behavior
- Increased health at the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual levels
- Became more responsible towards peers and community

Students as audience

- Increased knowledge about topic of interest
- Attitude, and sometimes behavior, change towards smoking, early marriage, and other discussed topics
- Learned knowledge communicated to other peers and family members

Cross cutting benefits

- Increased ability to address topics that are hard to discuss using traditional educational methods.
- Increased ability to discuss topics that are “relevant” to the students and from their “daily lives”.
- Some problems (shyness, problems at home, difficulties to perform, etc.) overcome when choosing students to perform.

WHAT YOUR SCHOOL WILL REQUIRE TO ENSURE A POSITIVE CHANGE?

Based on the evaluation it was found that there is no single way to implement *TBPE* for it was found effective in different contexts. However, the following questions and answers may be helpful in your decision whether to implement *TBPE* in your school.

WHAT IS REQUIRED FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF *TBPE* AT YOUR SCHOOL?

As described above, *TBPE* as a method of education, of teaching and learning, provides opportunities for freedom of expression, breaks barriers between students and teachers, and opens a safe space to discuss sensitive and often taboo topics. Schools that engage in *TBPE* must:

- Either already have this aura and atmosphere, or be willing to change their teaching to accommodate such an initiative.
- Provide full support and commitment of top administrators, most notably the principal. The school principal ought to be a champion and advocate for *TBPE*.

*If your school relies on more traditional methods of didactic teaching, where hierarchies between teachers and students cannot be broken, and if the school principal is not in support of *TBPE*, then you should not attempt to implement *TBPE*. In these schools, the implementation of *TBPE* could be harmful to students.*

WHAT ARE FACILITATING FACTORS?

If you are a school that has the required

criteria listed above, a variety of factors facilitate the success of a *TBPE* program:

- **The team of teachers:** *TBPE* was most successful when a team of teachers with different skills (theatre teachers, counselors, student advocates, etc.) all committed to the idea and potential of *TBPE* were trained and worked / cooperated together.
- **The physical resources:** *TBPE* is easier to implement in schools where drama classes are already offered.
- **Time issues:** Implementing *TBPE* is most effective when the program starts at the beginning of a school year. Time is also an issue in the allocation of sufficient sessions to the training of students in techniques of *TBPE* as well as developing and implementing the play. Adequate time for the showing of the play as well as for questions from the audience is critical.
- **Appropriate age for implementation:** Although *TBPE* has mostly been implemented in secondary classes in Lebanon, if a primary prevention approach is desired, these issues need to be tackled at a younger age, and we would recommend that *TBPE* be incorporated into middle school.

- **Follow-up:** The issues addressed by TBPE are often sensitive, controversial, or taboo; and have personal relevance to the lives of young people. The latter needs space for dialogue and reflection beyond one sketch or play. *TBPE* should consider strategies to ensure the continuity of discussion beyond the production and showing of one play. One suggestion is that the production results in problem solving groups – collection of students and teachers (or students alone) that engage with the issue and problem solve various aspects.

WHAT ARE ETHICAL ISSUES TO CONSIDER?

The evaluation clearly showed differences in benefit and impact between those students who were involved and trained, and those who only watched. As a result, the implementation of *TBPE* in every school should be holistic, comprehensive and inclusive of all students as performers. *TBPE* should be offered to all students, so that all have the opportunity to gain from this enriching experience. If not possible immediately, then in the interim, a select group of students can participate. In this case, the only ethical way to select the students is randomly, so that no perceptions of unfairness are felt.

CONCLUSION

TBPE as a method of education has resulted in significant benefit to schools. This benefit is perceived by all stakeholders. Overall, *TBPE* provides an opportunity for students to gain life skills that protect and promote their well-being and health. It is an exciting and energizing program for schools to implement and promote student health and well-being!