

University of Minnesota-Duluth

To Teach or Not to Teach:

Why and How We Should Include Shakespeare into Elementary School Education

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1. Introduction

Since the early 20th-century, analyzing the works of William Shakespeare has been a mainstay of educational curricula (Haughey). Yet in recent years, with an increased prioritization on standardized testing, William Shakespeare's impact on students has become limited. This has left many people within the American education system questioning the validity of Shakespeare. However, budding research shows that high school may not be the ideal time to introduce Shakespeare to students. Teaching elementary schoolers, specifically second through fourth grade, results in a better understanding and appreciation for William Shakespeare. Elementary school curriculum should include Shakespeare into their pedagogy rather than introducing Shakespeare in high school. By using performance-based teaching methods, exposing elementary schoolers to Shakespearean texts stimulates academic success, curates a deep appreciation for literature, all the while promoting self-confidence and empathy.

2. Background

Like most people who journeyed through the American education system, my first induction into the works of William Shakespeare was ninth grade English class. Being naturally theatrical with an affinity for reading, I looked like just the student to latch onto William Shakespeare. But truthfully, I absolutely despised the Shakespeare unit. I found assignments to be dull, stale, and not the least bit dynamic. Each minute I sat in class was painstaking as I counted down the seconds before I could escape to lunch. Cognitively, I recognized the valuable nature of Shakespearean language. I understood the impact Shakespeare had on the theatre world and I knew of his influence in shaping western culture. All of that, I got. I just didn't care.

I held onto the belief that Shakespeare was an unnecessary aspect to the American education system up until my sophomore year of college. In the pursuit of a theatre degree, one

of the required classes was a Shakespeare acting course. During the beginning stages of the semester, I was struggling. I had a hard time connecting with the material and embracing the antiquated language. A friend of mine recommended I watch the Youtube video *Kid Shakespeare Expert Zoey Cardamone Performs from 'Macbeth'* which premiered in 2018 on *The Ellen Show*. The clip depicts six-year-old Zoey performing Lady Macbeth's 'Damned Spot' monologue. I was told to watch for Zoey's fearlessness—her confidence—while performing the material. Sure enough, Zoey was a wonder.

Dolled up in Elizabethan garb, Zoey recited Lady Macbeth's monologue with ease, flawlessly applying the appropriate scansion¹ to each stanza—a technique that took me months to learn. She spoke with varying levels of volume, emphasizing the most emotional and crucial points of the text with a harsh whisper. On the final couplet, Zoey, with wide doe eyes and an outstretched hand, begged “come, come, come, come give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone.—To bed! To bed! To bed!”

The audience was entranced. Zoey performed with the maturity and conviction of an actor far beyond her years. At six years old, Zoey was leaps and bounds further than me in my own journey with Shakespeare. After the initial shock of being bested in my career of choice by a kindergartener, I came to the soothing realization that I had the tools to perform with the same assuredness Zoey had. I kept thinking about how beneficial Zoey's early education of Shakespeare would have on her life. I repeatedly thought “*Wow, this kid is set.*” I became fascinated with how Shakespeare texts impact developing minds such as Zoey's.

¹ Scansion refers to the method or practice of determining and graphically representing the metrical pattern of a line of verse. In classical poetry, these patterns are based on the different lengths of each syllable (Greene & Cushman).

3. Quantitative Effects of Performance-based Teaching

Shakespeare's impact has been studied for centuries, but recently, his effect on youth education has risen to prevalence in pedagogical sectors. In 2017, the University of Warwick conducted a study that analyzed the benefit learning the works of William Shakespeare has on students. Researchers found that when Shakespeare was included into the elementary curriculum, self-assurance in students sky-rocketed (Lindsey et al.). 95% of teachers said that collaborating with the Royal Shakespeare Company resulted in students becoming "more willing to contribute ideas and opinions in class". 94% stated that including Shakespeare into their curriculum assisted in building their students' confidence in finding their voice by improving language skills and confidence in reading, writing, and speaking. By using a performance-based approach in teaching Shakespeare, educators found that students engaged with the material substantially more than standard, passive approaches to Shakespeare education (ibid).

4. Current Standard Model of Teaching

Though numerous studies have confirmed the benefit Shakespearean education has on language acquisition skills and self-confidence, the validity of Shakespeare is still questioned, particularly in the American education system. The stigma often associated with the works of William Shakespeare is found heavily in American classrooms. There has been a significant increase of teachers and administrators who question why Shakespeare is included in the standard core curriculum. In her thesis *Introducing Shakespeare Early: Why, When, and How to Teach Shakespeare to Elementary and Middle School Students*, Angela Ramnanan highlights the pressure educators face to comply with more traditional teaching methods to effectively equip students for American standardized testing:

In the context of learning for test taking, students' interaction with Shakespeare's works is focused on developing their ability to demonstrate cognitive proficiency of Shakespeare based on pre-packaged ideas and conclusions delivered to them by teachers. When the ability to recall answers for a test becomes the ultimate goal of the classroom, the reflective experience with Shakespeare's text is diminished, and students and even teachers blame the literature instead of a faulty system. This cycle of frustration leads to questions regarding the relevance of Shakespeare and other quality literature. (Ramnanan 2013, 15-16)

After realizing my disinterest towards Shakespeare may have been a byproduct of ineffective teaching, I asked my 17-year-old sister what her ninth grade Shakespeare unit was like. She responded simply: "I really don't remember." My sister expressed a similar story to mine. The assignments were boring and lacked real world application, leading to minimal engagement with the material. My sister's sentiment and the University of Warwick's research conclusions clashed dramatically. While the University of Warwick's results emphasized the positive impact learning Shakespeare has on students, both my sister and I had a more negative (or at least apathetic) experience when introduced to Shakespeare. The difference between our reaction and the University of Warwick's subject's reaction came down to two factors: teaching methods and age.

5. Adjusting Shakespeare Teaching Methods

Associate director of the Salisbury Playhouse, Mark Powell explains in his article *Kill Bill: Why we must take Shakespeare out of the classroom* that, in order to fully engage with material, students must put the work on its feet. Powell remarks that teachers are often forced to have strict and exact answers to their students' questions. Rarely are they encouraged to respond with "I don't know". This limits the ability to probe and dissect the dialogue. Performers are

required to analyze the text and come up with their own interpretations which ends up leaving a lasting impact on the actor (Powell). The standard teaching method prohibits students from creating personal meaning and ultimately does both William Shakespeare and students a disservice.

6. High School Shakespeare Education Ineffectivity

Additionally, age is also a factor that impacts a student's engagement with Shakespearean material. Culturally, Shakespeare has influenced the fabric of our society in a fashion that is hard to ignore. Beloved Disney classic *The Lion King* was inspired by *Hamlet*. *Romeo and Juliet* is widely considered to be the most famous love story ever told. Shakespeare was even the inventor of over 1700 commonly-used words (*How Shakespeare changed literature around the world*). Despite his prolific reputation, Shakespeare is often held on a pedestal that many people think can only be accessed by stuffy academics or world-renowned actors. With text written over 400 years ago, the question of whether or not teaching Shakespeare, particularly to younger students, in the original text is even possible lingers. But as Zoey Cardamone proves, teaching Shakespeare to elementary students absolutely can be done.

By the time most students enter high school, the fear and intimidation of Shakespeare's antiquated language has effectively crept in. In March of 2010, the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR) from the University of Warwick published a report that measured students ages 15-16's attitudes towards Shakespeare. Unsurprisingly, 46% of the students analyzed agreed with the statement "Studying Shakespeare is boring" while 49% agreed with the statement "I find Shakespeare's plays difficult to understand" (Ramnanan 2013, 29). However when looking at students in Zoey's age range, their excitement towards the text is palpable.

7. Zoey Cardamone's Shakespeare Experience

After watching her performance on *The Ellen Show*, I interviewed Zoey and her father, Steve Cardamone, to see if her relationship with Shakespeare has evolved since 2018. During our interview, Zoey was even more precocious than she was on *The Ellen Show*. She was whip-smart with a highly extensive and advanced vocabulary. Zoey still had deep admiration for Shakespeare and spoke enthusiastically about how she was first exposed to Shakespeare:

My parents do Shakespeare. I wanted to find out what that was and it sounded like a good thing. Obviously I didn't know the language or that it was a play and that it was acting. So, the oblivious child that I was just asked "What is Shakespeare?" and "Can I do it?" My first monologue [that I worked on] was Puck. And it was like a toy I wanted to eat. I loved it. (Zoey Cardamone April 13, 2021)

Her father, Steve Cardamone, teaches Shakespearean acting at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities Guthrie program. Cardamone believes Zoey's affinity and fascination with William Shakespeare stems from her lack of intimidation with the text:

The big thing is that nobody told her it was supposed to be hard. And I remember in high school, we all didn't want to do it! It was just like "Ugh. We have to read *Shakespeare*?" Shakespeare never wrote his plays to be read. He didn't want to torture people in class. These are plays! When you read them, it's really hard because you need that theatrical component. You need actors to help you with that language. Not to say you can't read [them] but that wasn't the goal—to have plays be read. (Steve Cardamone April 13, 2021)

When teaching Zoey the monologues, Cardamone broke it down like any other piece of theatrical text. They worked with the context of the monologue and as Steve emphatically said “it was just about doing it. Get that piece on its feet and the rest will fall into place.”

8. Neural Development and Unfamiliar Language

Zoey is a prime example of an effective performance-based approach in teaching Shakespeare. However, with parents actively involved in the theatre world, Zoey’s experience is unique. The practicality of adding Shakespeare to a traditional elementary curriculum is still questioned. Considering the antiquated nature of Shakespeare and Elizabethan English, much of the language is unfamiliar to the general public. Noting the 400-year span between the time William Shakespeare wrote his seminal works and the modern age, semantics, language, and grammar has evolved, making it difficult for even the most fluent of English speakers to understand the text (McWhorter).

With the archaic language used in Shakespeare’s work, in terms of recognizability, Elizabethan English is much more comparable to a foreign language. Due to the brain’s elasticity and rapid neural formation, elementary school students have a higher chance of learning new languages (Galatro). Young children use deep motor parts of the brain designated for unconscious action which makes it much easier to learn a second language. According to Dr. Paul Thompson, neurology professor at UCLA, by the time children turn eleven, centers in the brain responsible for language acquisition stop growing rapidly and language acquisition becomes more difficult (Perkins). This makes introducing Shakespeare to elementary students even more crucial. Despite the concern over the challenging nature of Shakespearean text, elementary school is the ideal time to introduce Shakespeare to students. With the brain’s

elasticity and neural development, elementary students are much more susceptible to retain unfamiliar information.

9. Stephanie Erb's Second Grade Shakespeare Class

L.A.-based actress, Stephanie Erb saw the feasibility of teaching Shakespeare to elementary schoolers first-hand when teaching Shakespeare to her son's second grade class. After noticing the boredom her son and additional students felt when participating in their standard classwork, Erb proposed adding Shakespeare to the students weekly routine:

I talked to a very salty second grade teacher and I said "I know alot about Shakespeare. I would like to take these kids and help him do something that's a little extracurricular. I would like to teach these kids Shakespeare and she laughed at me. She was "Oh, they're not gonna get it. That's not gonna work." I said "I disagree. Would you give me like a couple hours a week and I'll come in and we'll have Shakespeare time with the kids." And she said "I'm really skeptical but if you want to give it a shot let's try it for a week or two." I became even more determined to make it work because her underestimation of what these kids would do is part of the problem with the education system. (Stephanie Erb May 12, 2021)

9.1 Erb's Curriculum Overview

Twice a week, Erb went into the class and taught Shakespeare to the students. She began the coursework with having students read abridged children's versions of Shakespeare's plays to familiarize them to his plotlines and story structure. Erb then compared various Shakespeare archetypes to characters in contemporary children's media. Using Disney characters, *Scooby Doo*, and video games, Erb explained to the students that "these are not people or characters that

are unfamiliar to you. This is all stuff that you already like but the language is a little different. Is the language impossible to learn? No.”

In order to orientate the students to the language, Erb had her class watch Lawrence Olivier’s *Hamlet*. After watching the scene where Hamlet speaks to the ghost of his father, she asked the students if they understood what was going on. They all emphatically said yes. In addition to the movie scenes, Erb also supplied the students with a list of words Shakespeare created and tasked them with writing sentences incorporating the listed words. After the end of the second week, their teacher announced that Erb could teach Shakespeare as long as she wanted.

9.2 Outcome of Erb’s Class

The success of Erb’s Shakespeare class can be attributed to her belief in the students. Despite their young age, Erb recognized the second graders’ desire to learn complex concepts and ideas. Though the plot structure of Shakespeare isn’t incredibly complicated to grasp, the language turns educators away from teaching elementary students the works of William Shakespeare. By breaking down the language and stories into bite-sized pieces, the students were able to pick up on Shakespeare effectively. Even going as far as including iambic pentameter² into the curriculum, Erb reported that the students picked up on the material quickly and left the class with an increased appreciation to heightened text:

It went really well. Every single kid who took my workshop decided Shakespeare was cool. And to me that is something that no one in the modern American educational system thinks...It’s just not taught in a very inventive way. I think it

² Iambic Pentameter is defined as a line of verse with five metrical feet, each consisting of one short (or unstressed) syllable followed by one long (or stressed) syllable, for example *Two households, both alike in dignity* (Oxford Dictionary)

should be taught earlier so then when they come across prose, poetry or iambic pentameter, it doesn't sound so crazy to them. (Stephanie Erb May 12, 2021)

10. Shakespeare as an Outlet for Creativity and Confidence

Not only does Shakespeare education impact students' English and reading skills, learning Shakespeare allows for students to take creative risks. As demonstrated in the University of Warwick's study on teaching Shakespeare, Zoey's experience, and Stephanie Erb's class, the key to accessibility in Shakespeare education is a performance-based learning model. Cambridge academic, Rex Gibson wrote in his 1998 textbook *Teaching Shakespeare* that performance-based teaching methods pave the way for collaborative creativity (Kitchen). When students work on a piece of Shakespearean text, a crucial factor for accomplishment is through cultivating a safe space where there is no "right" or "wrong" answer (ibid). This allows for students to find inner confidence in their own abilities.

11. Shakespeare, Joy, and the Human Condition

Theatre-maker, author, and educator, Rob Crisell recounts in his TedTalk *How NOT to Hate Shakespeare* one of his first experiences with teaching Shakespeare to middle school students. Using performance-based teaching methods, Crisell had his students act out *Romeo and Juliet*. He noted one particular student, a shy seventh grader Crisell referred to as "Maria", as an undeniable natural. After casting "Maria" as Juliet, Crisell watched as she completely came out of her shell during performance. He explained that, when "Maria" played Juliet, it was as if "she had written the lines herself." Her teacher informed Crisell that "Maria" came from a difficult home life. Her mother left when she was a young girl and her father had recently died of a drug overdose. "Maria" was quiet, a poor student, and struggled with making friends. But when she

took to the stage, all remnants of her personal life faded away. Everyone in the class could see how happy it made her (Crisell).

Crisell asked her what it was about Shakespeare that she enjoyed so much. Without hesitation, “Maria” declared “Because I can pretend to be someone else for a while!” That, Crisell exclaimed, was the root of why Shakespeare shouldn’t be feared. Shakespeare allows for us to explore all spectrums of the human condition. Crisell continues, “When children become his characters, when they mourn the loss of a loved one as King Lear or struggle with depression as Hamlet or fall hopelessly in love as Juliet, they get a chance to feel. They might not be able to express themselves in words but [through] Shakespeare’s words, they learn that they are not all alone.”

12. Shakespeare and Empathy

Teaching Shakespeare teaches empathy. Of course, working with Shakespeare also teaches language acquisition skills, plot structure, and heightened text, but exploring Shakespeare’s cannon unlocks empathy in a way that has been unmatched by other celebrated works of literature. In her book *Of Human Kindness: What Shakespeare Teaches Us About Empathy*, Professor Paula Marantz Cohen analyzed how discussing and teaching Shakespeare in the classroom incites compassion within her students. Cohen cited *Hamlet* when discussing the impact Shakespeare has on understanding empathy. She noted that many of her students could feel a sense of kinship with Hamlet and his relationship with his father. Some students resonated with the close-knit bond Hamlet has with his father while other students could identify with the need to “be their own person” (79). She explained that *Hamlet* sparked discussion over the fight between familial loyalty and self-empowerment. This brought to light the struggle almost all students could universally identify with: the desire to appreciate the past and the need to grow in

the present (82). By studying Shakespeare, Cohen's students weren't just extending empathy towards their fellow students. They extended empathy towards themselves.

13. Conclusion

The idea of introducing Shakespeare into the curriculum shouldn't be designated to advanced or high school students. Elementary schoolers as young as kindergarten have the ability to comprehend and perform Shakespeare as effectively as a high school student. Perhaps even more so. Age shouldn't deter educators from introducing children to Shakespeare—especially when the impact is so positive. The inclusion of performance-based Shakespeare pedagogy into elementary education provides students with the tools to become competent learners, confident speakers, and compassionate humans.

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