

## **Dina: A Voice That Was Finally Heard**

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She was never mischievous enough to sit at the back of the classroom, nor studious enough to belong in the front row. Dina always occupied the middle ground—quiet, almost invisible. It was as if the only thing noticeable about her were her eyes, peeking out from above her mask.

She never volunteered, never expressed an opinion, and barely spoke to her seatmate. No one had ever heard Dina's voice.

Until one day...

### **The Beginning of a Transformation**

In mid-November, I decided to form a theater group for the Khwarizmi Festival. The moment I announced it in class, twelve hands shot up like windshield wipers in the middle of a snowstorm. The confident students, the high achievers, those who spoke eloquently.

But I was rooting for the underdogs. I wanted to give a chance to those who had never won, yet had never truly lost either.

The chosen play: The Tale of Zal and Simorgh.

Except for two members, the rest of the group was composed of what the school often labeled as "troublemakers." Zeynab, overwhelmed with anxiety, fidgeted with her shirt's button so much during practice that it eventually came off. Her constant stammering disrupted every rehearsal, forcing her to apologize repeatedly. Hananeh, the sensitive

one, cried from stress more times than we could count. No matter how much we reassured her, she always felt inadequate. She withdrew from the group a thousand times, only to return a thousand times more.

But Dina...

Dina was like a skilled swimmer who had never been given the chance to dive into the water. Slowly, she removed her mask—both literally and figuratively. She unlocked the words stored deep in her mind. Before we knew it, she became the most creative member of the team. She crafted a horse for herself, made a mustache and a hat for Sam Nariman, and even deepened her voice to match his character.

Dina was no longer just a pair of silent eyes—she became the voice of the group.

The Performance Day: A Turning Point

The day of the final performance arrived. They had to perform in front of the entire school.

Ours was a two-level institution, meaning students from seventh to thirteenth grade were in the audience. The fear of being ridiculed by the older students loomed over them. If they failed, if they made mistakes, the taunts could haunt them forever.

I gathered them in the library—our version of a locker room before a big match. I told them to step onto that stage like Persian lionesses and to embrace the courage to fail.

After all, none of those so-called "big guys" in school—the ones towering over others with their intimidating presence—had the courage to perform on stage. And a person who tries and fails is far superior to one who does nothing but mock others.

I hugged them and said, "No matter what happens, just look at me. Watch how I cheer for you with excitement."

I shared my own struggles—the moments when failure had nearly broken me, when anxiety gnawed at my stomach like a relentless mole burrowing deep inside.

Truthfully, I didn't entirely trust that they would succeed. I had prepared myself for forgotten lines, for nervous breakdowns, for technical mishaps. I was even ready to step in if someone broke down in tears mid-performance.

But...

That same quiet Dina, that same sensitive Hananeh, that same fearful Zeynab—

They recited the Shahnameh with such passion and confidence that I felt blossoms sprouting from my cheeks.

And for the first time in the history of Kahak district, an eighth-grade theater group from a rural school won first place in the city of Qom.

### A Perfect Score in My Teaching Career

Today, Dina is no longer a shadow in the classroom. Now in ninth grade, she stands tall, participates in school events, writes poetry, reads aloud in front of audiences, and even introduces books in class.

I tell myself...

Even if every other day of my teaching career had been wasted, even if I had drowned in mediocrity, I still have Dina—a perfect score in my personal teaching record

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# **The Transformative Power of Theater in Education: A Case Study on Empowering Shy and Overlooked Students**

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## **Introduction**

Traditional education systems primarily emphasize standardized assessments and academic performance, often overlooking students' social skills, self-confidence, and self-expression. Many students, especially introverts or those who have experienced social setbacks, have limited opportunities to express themselves. In such cases, alternative educational methods, such as theater, can provide a platform for these students to flourish.

This case study examines the impact of a school theater group that, by staging a play based on the Shahnameh and performing it at a festival, transformed shy and low-confidence students into courageous, creative, and empowered individuals. It highlights how theatrical experiences can bring marginalized students to the forefront, fostering their personal and social development.

## **Discussion**

Research indicates that experiential learning is one of the most effective ways to increase student engagement and develop social skills (Kolb, 1984). In this case, performing in a play allowed students who rarely participated in class to express themselves in a safe, non-judgmental environment. The key factors contributing to the success of this approach are examined below:

### **1. Providing Opportunities for Overlooked Students**

Extracurricular activities often prioritize talented and active students, leaving others behind. However, in this case, the teacher intentionally included students who were neither high achievers nor entirely disengaged. According to Vygotsky's (1978) "Zone of Proximal Development" theory, students grow best when placed in a supportive environment that challenges them just beyond their current abilities.

## 2. Developing Social and Emotional Skills Through Theater

Theater fosters critical skills such as anxiety management, emotional expression, teamwork, and creativity (Garaigordobil & Berruenco, 2011). Students who once remained silent in class gradually learned to project their voices, share ideas, and take on different roles, thereby enhancing their interpersonal and communicative skills.

## 3. The Teacher's Role in Building Confidence

Initially, the teacher had doubts about the group's success. However, through verbal encouragement, motivation, and reassurance that mistakes were part of the learning process, they created an environment where students felt safe to take risks. Research suggests that teachers' belief in their students' abilities significantly impacts their success (Hattie, 2009).

## 4. Outcomes Beyond Expectations

Students who once hesitated to speak in class performed confidently on stage, won a regional award, and became more active in school activities. These results demonstrate that experiential learning influences not only academic performance but also students' personal and social growth.

## Conclusion

This case study illustrates that alternative educational approaches, such as theater, can profoundly impact students who are often overlooked in traditional systems. When the learning environment is designed to support all students—not just the naturally gifted or outspoken—hidden potentials emerge.

Theater is not merely an artistic tool; it is an educational strategy that fosters social skills, builds self-confidence, and instills a sense of achievement in students. The

transformation of Dina and her peers demonstrates that sometimes a small opportunity can open new pathways in a student's life. Therefore, educators must look beyond conventional teaching methods and embrace innovative approaches that help students discover and develop their talents.