

Imagining Spaces, Tools, and Activities for Playful Training: The Art of Kamishibai¹

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Abstract

Building on years of experimentation across diverse educational settings, this initiative showcases a professional development experience for educators focused on the use of Kamishibai – a Japanese storytelling art meaning “paper theater”. Held in Bressanone in October 2023 in collaboration with the MultiLab, a physical space and an opportunity for project co-planning of the Free University of Bozen- Bolzano, the programme delved into the cultural and philosophical roots of this ancient art form, highlighting its rich pedagogical and didactic potential. The training emphasized how Kamishibai fosters a holistic educational process that nurtures personal and interpersonal awareness while enhancing relational, communicative, and creative abilities.

Kamishibai provides a unique framework for exploring emotional literacy by engaging the body and senses. It opens an aesthetic space for self-expression through the synergy of multiple languages. Beyond serving as a teaching tool, Kamishibai becomes a dynamic space for imagination, expression, sharing, and action – a realm for playing with space and time dimensions through diverse perspectives, unlocking meaning through exploration and creativity.

The training experience is presented through both theoretical insights and practical reflections, supported by documentation and testimonials from participants. Central themes that emerged during the process will be examined, emphasizing the transformative role of storytelling with Kamishibai.

1 The contribution is the joint work of three authors. However, paragraphs 1 and 2 are attributed to Rita Casadei, paragraphs 3.0, 3.3, and 3.4 to Sara Baroni and paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2 to Alessandro Gelmi, the conclusion to Alessandro Gelmi and Sara Baroni.

1. The Art of Kamishibai

紙芝居 – Kamishibai – is how these ideograms sound in Japanese. Internationally translated as paper play, paper drama, and paper theatre, where 紙 kami stands for paper and 芝居 shibai stands for play, opera, story, scene, theatre. Kamishibai can be described in an artistic-expressive form in which the narrative and the sound are united with the visual. Before going into a presentation of this specific form of narration-communication-expression, some notes will be given to help those who are not at all familiar with this reality figure out what we are physically referring to a wooden theatre (舞台 butai) that serves as frame, space, time and place of the narration, two wooden clappers (拍子木 hyoushigi) that resonate and announce the beginning of the event, tables depicting the story, the storyteller, the audience, a welcoming space.

Traditionally, as this was an itinerant form of entertainment, the small butai was set up on a bicycle, thus enabling the storyteller to reach different areas of any given city. To begin with, it is necessary to point out the socio-historical reality in which Kamishibai takes origin. It started off in Japan at the end of the 1920s where its great popularity in the streets lasted until the 1970s; from that time on, the presence and gradual spread of television and other communication media determined its necessary adaptation to more circumscribed contexts but it continued to gain interest even on an international scale. First of all, Kamishibai is the fantasy space on the street corners of cities, where at the call of the two clappers, children flock to meet the storyteller ready to entertain, amuse and enthuse them. This is the image that has most penetrated the memory and heart of those who experienced childhood between the 20s and 70s. It may be useful to start from the concrete fact that it is a sensory and aesthetic experience in which imaginative thinking, gesture, sounds, and voice mutually solicit each other to promote a narrative filled with imaginative and creative possibilities, on the levels of thinking and language, and relational and emotional expressive skills. The show all begins with an attention-grabbing sound, announcing the start of the performance, which attracts a wide audience, not only the very young. This sound acts as an invitation to participate, which is already a statement of its intent to include, welcome and integrate. It is an important element in

the ceremonial aspect of other ritualised forms, where religious, artistic and folkloric elements are often intertwined. The sound produced by the wooden clappers is a call to take part in the performance, not just be passive, but active within a chorally-experienced event. In this case, one becomes part of a narrative intertwined with the image, its movement and the context – cultural, social and natural – within which it all takes place. The popularity of Kamishibai, and the interest that seems to have become renewed in it, may be said to derive from its being a dynamic, bodily tactile experience where the physical, sensorial and emotional touch and contact is a continuum marked by different aspects.

Historically, Kamishibai may have several precursors that date back to ancient times. It is possible to trace Kamishibai back to the 12th century with the traditional genre of e-toki 絵解き (literally: explanation through images). This genre includes the artistic form of the e-makimono 絵巻物 – depictions on sheets of paper or cloth to be rolled up and unrolled – used to visually narrate stories of prominent historical and literary figures. E-makimono is connected to the practice of e-toki with which buddhist monks instructed the population – not always literate – using illustrated episodes from the Buddha's life. This served to communicate precepts and conduct useful for community life, fostering shared values and social cohesion through a blend of moral teaching and aesthetic experience. Another related form of storytelling involves no illustrations, but rather evokes imagery through chant and musical narration. Singing and music are carried by a storytelling monk: biwa houshi. This term denoted the blind wandering monk who told stories while accompanying himself with a traditional stringed instrument, called biwa. The coexistence of a multiplicity of expressive languages makes these artistic-communicative genres a formula for conveying taste, sensitivity, entertainment, information, education. Kamishibai is more than a form of visual storytelling – it is a cross-disciplinary phenomenon shaped by cultural, social, political, and architectural dynamics. Along with the informal style, “educational kamishibai” also came into being: 教育 - Kyouiku Kamishibai. This distinction can be explained from the rising interest in Japan for reconsidering the concept of childhood with its specific evolutionary stages and its needs concerned to instruction and learning. Contents and ludic-didactic programmes were designed by adults and always oriented towards an eminently educational purpose.

Kamishibai is still alive today. Its revival reflects a desire for a simpler, more mindful, and less hurried way of life. Currently, Kamishibai is used in pre-school services and kindergartens, but above all it lives in cultural centres and local libraries that seem to replace what used to be the street. Community places such as cultural centres and libraries are experienced by children as free, open spaces in which the presence of parents and teachers does not prevail. This factor seems to somehow reawaken a spirit of openness and freedom (Bingushi, 2005). These are the spaces where Kamishibai is preserved and continues to evolve in contemporary Japan. The aims are playful, but include the transmission of content and knowledge useful for a spirit of active citizenship.

2. A Teacher Education Experience Through the Art of Kamishibai

This paper presents a teacher training experience based on the art of Kamishibai, held at the MultiLab on the Brixen University Campus in autumn 2023. Adopting a holistic educational approach, the training aimed to engage participants across multiple dimensions – physical, cognitive, emotional, and affective – by creating space for exploration, recognition, and meaningful experience. Above all, the activity aimed to make adult-leaders experience the meaning of play, revitalizing all its characteristics that make it a fundamental experience, at all ages (Rodari, 1973). To support this objective, the training took the form of a hands-on workshop – an experimental space for methodology, imagination, creativity, and social-relational skill development (Frabboni, 2004). Before being seen as a teaching tool, Kamishibai should be understood as a space that nurtures imagination, expression, sharing, and action .. It is the space in which to “play” the space-time dimension according to different parameters and sensibilities, probing its meaning in terms of exploration, creativity, sharing and collaboration (Munari, 1977). The Kamishibai offers opportunities to explore emotional literacy through the involvement of the body and senses and opens to an aesthetic perspective that facilitates self-expression through the combination of multiple artistic-expressive languages. Extensive studies and in-progress research make it possible to high-

light the pedagogical-didactic potential for training and education that can develop personal and interpersonal awareness, considering the wholeness of the person and the social, cultural and natural environment in which they live. Training through the Kamishibai has been considered for emotional literacy, which includes literacy to imaginative thinking and expressive potentials, which can find their fulfillment (Casadei, 2022). Writing, reading, illustrating and animating become ways of giving voice to oneself and others, within a methodology that values listening as deeply as speaking, and gestures as powerfully as words. Central to this approach is the need to listen and be heard, to unlock imagination and creativity – not as indulgence, but as a writing, generative force that gives shape even to uncharted thoughts. From this perspective the Kamishibai engages the exercise of logical and creative thinking, the ability to figure and build sequences, the ability to represent through the sign of writing and through drawing, in all its descriptive and evocative potential. Then comes the narrative voice that gives body to the story and helps the imagination to emerge within a tangible shape. The spoken word carries tones that allow different emotional tones to be experienced and expressed. Last, but not least, is the gesture that also speaks; in this case reading is giving voice to the gesture to enter into contact with the story.

Building on these theoretical foundations, the training experience – attended by 17 primary and preschool teachers, along with librarians – invited participants to actively engage by experimenting firsthand. They explored the use of their voice, body, linguistic and graphic skills, as well as their emotional and interpersonal abilities. The program began with a theoretical introduction, followed by dynamic activities designed to integrate body, mind, and breath. Participants then engaged in listening to stories read aloud and collaborated in group tasks such as rewriting and creatively representing the stories. Ample space was also dedicated to reflection, facilitated through personal journaling and the collection of feedback from participants.

3. Giving Voice to the Participants

During the training experience the participants were invited to write down their thoughts both in their diaries and on sheets of paper to be placed in-

side an envelope. This approach draws inspiration from Mortari's "box of thoughts" method, often used in research with children (2009). Participants' openness to documenting their experiences was especially valuable for two main reasons. First, it provided a key moment in the training, allowing participants to leave a personal trace and engage in reflective practice. Secondly, it allowed the trainers to obtain rich feedback that was functional both for the subsequent training meetings and for possible future research pathways. At the end of each meeting, care was taken to read the written thoughts to make them the subject of a shared reflection on what the participants' perceptions of the learning experience might have been. Finally, they were asked to complete an anonymous satisfaction questionnaire through which they were asked, among other things, to write down their level of enjoyment of the course, what they most appreciated, what they did not, whether there was anything they would like to change, what they feel they would like "to take away" from the course on a professional and/or personal level. In addition to this, they were guided in the creation of a strictly personal logbook, which some chose to share voluntarily. After the training, all submitted reflections were transcribed by the authors. Using qualitative analysis software (Maxqda), the most frequently mentioned themes were inductively categorized. It is important to note that this was not a formal analysis, but rather a way of documenting the experience – a tool to inspire further reflection, without aiming to be representative. In doing so, four recurring themes were identified, which will be briefly described in the following paragraphs: imagination/creativity, sense of community, (re)valuing time, and expressive languages.

3.1 Imagination and Creativity

A central theme emerging from participants' reflections was the exploration of imagination and creativity, which proved to be fundamental elements of the training experience. These two aspects were not only implicit objectives of the course but also key lenses through which participants interpreted their own experiences and those of the students they work with.

One significant aspect of this theme concerns participants' reflections on the potential of kamishibai as an educational tool for stimulating and engaging children's imagination. Adapting a story for Kamishibai was seen as both

intellectually demanding and deeply rewarding, requiring considerable cognitive and emotional engagement. As one participant observed: “The transformation of the story for Kamishibai is a challenging mental exercise that heavily involves imagination but ultimately brings great satisfaction.”

This reflection illustrates both the effort required and the satisfaction gained through creative engagement. The participants’ reflections align with theoretical insights on the pedagogical value of imaginative and creative activities. These activities go beyond merely capturing children’s attention; they contribute to the co-construction of meaningful learning experiences. Imagination enables children to see from new perspectives, collaborate effectively, and connect learning content to their lived experiences (Vygotsky, 2004; Resnick, 2017; Akkerman, 2018; Starko, 2021).

However, the theme of imagination and creativity was not limited to children’s engagement; it also encompassed participants’ own involvement in the training process. Participants also reflected on their own creative roles during the course, emphasizing how the experience revived their sense of discovery and expressive freedom. This personal engagement was supported by several key factors that participants directly linked to their imaginative and creative involvement in experiencing and creating stories with Kamishibai. Among these factors, participants highlighted the importance of a relaxed sense of time, which allowed full immersion in the activities. They also emphasized the collaborative environment – marked by sharing, solidarity, and dialogue – that fostered mutual support and inspiration. In addition, they appreciated access to a range of diverse expressive tools and languages, often lacking in their daily roles as educators: “I had the chance to draw after a long time without doing it... all to the benefit of creativity and imagination”. These elements will be explored in greater detail in subsequent sections. Altogether, they highlight the importance of providing educators with opportunities to experiment and rediscover their own creative and imaginative potential. This not only enriches their repertoire of professional skills, but also renews awareness of the transformative role imagination and creativity play in education (Egan, 1997, 2005; Egan & Judson, 2016; Glaveanu et al., 2020).

3.2 Sense of Community

A prominent theme in participants' reflections was the emergence of a strong sense of community. This concept, recurring across many testimonies, represented a central element of the course experience. Participants described the sense of community as a natural and organic feeling that developed spontaneously, thanks to the welcoming environment and the quality of the interactions. One participant encapsulated this sentiment succinctly: "We enjoyed being in a group, spontaneously creating a sense of community." This perspective reveals both the joy of group cohesion and the ease with which meaningful bonds formed in an inclusive, participatory setting (Winstone et al., 2020).

When analysed more closely, the sense of community described by participants unfolded into two primary dimensions, each offering insight into the importance of this aspect of the training experience.

The first dimension relates to a sense of belonging, understood as the feeling of being part of a group that fosters emotional support, acceptance, and an authentic spirit of sharing (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). This sense of belonging is vividly conveyed in the words of a participant who reflected on the experience as follows: "This course has been a true journey of discovery: filled with emotion, engagement, and a welcoming spirit. A place that truly felt like home." This testimony evokes the concept of "home" – not as a physical place, but as a symbolic space where individuals feel safe, accepted, and free to express themselves. Many participants repeatedly mentioned this sense of kinship (Glaveanu, 2020; Tanggaard, 2020), highlighting how shared creative efforts and collective expression helped build deep and meaningful bonds. In collaboratively creating and retelling stories through Kamishibai, the imaginative process took on a deeply interpersonal dimension. This aligns with what contemporary research on creative pedagogies define as co-creativity (Franklin, 2022), where collaboration transcends mere dialogic exchange to cultivate a deep sense of reciprocity and affinity, within a communal sense of unity and connectedness (Kimmel & Hristova, 2021; Beaty et al., 2021).

The second dimension pertains to the freedom and serenity required to negotiate meanings and engage in generative exchanges. Participants frequently emphasized how the course created an atmosphere that offered not

only a sense of safety but also opportunities to explore and express ideas freely, without fear of judgment. This is captured in statements highlighting the concept of freedom: “A community was formed where freedom became the key to expressing concepts and ideas”, or the role of experimentation and error: “Sharing together, creating, imagining: there’s no RIGHT or WRONG.” In this context, freedom is not merely an absence of constraints but a vital condition for fostering creativity and authenticity. This aligns with theoretical discussions on the risks inherent in educational environments designed to support shared creativity (Glaveanu, 2020). These environments underscore the need for psychological safety as a foundation for creative dialogue – especially when such processes involve uncertainty, emotional risk, and productive tensions. (Bakhtin, 1981).

3.3 (Re)valuing Time

The value of time is one of the themes most frequently found within the participants’ thoughts. It emerged repeatedly in both written reflections and questionnaire responses. It also seems to be as much linked to the practice of telling stories with the Kamishibai with “a slow and cadenced rhythm” and with “slow gestures” as an opening towards a broader reflection on one’s professional and personal life.

Taking up the many reflections on our society characterised by consumerism, the constant quest for efficiency, the impossibility of dwelling on things, collecting adults’ reflections on the “rediscovered pleasure of slowness” can be considered meaningful. If during the pandemic seemed to have opened possibilities for slowing down, today’s speed seems to have returned as the dominant logic (De Faveri, 2023). Thinking about the implications this logic may have on educational practice, one could cite research conducted in Flanders (Peleman, 2020) that showed how three-year-old children spend 20 to 30 per cent of their time in kindergarten waiting. This happens because educators, to avoid “wasting time” in the name of efficiency, wait until all the children are ready before moving on to the next activity. In this regard, Clark (2022) stresses the urgency of counteracting this harmful acceleration, which begins as early as childhood.

The discourse on the importance of allowing time for children to engage in enjoyable activities can be found in numerous philosophers and pedagogues, whose contribution still seems to be relevant today. Comenius argued that it is necessary to find strategies that allow teachers to teach less and learners to learn more and, in this regard, called for less talk and useless work, but more free time for the pleasure of learning (Gola, 2021). In *Emile* Rousseau (1762/2016) argued that, to educate, it is necessary to “learn to waste time in order to gain time”, i.e. to allow children to enjoy the happiness of play, nature and movement. Montessori (1948/1999), emphasised how a good teacher is one who’s able to respect the unfolding of the child’s intelligence, not substituting himself for him, but in a context of freedom letting him choose which activity to devote himself to, and in this sense taking care to preserve his concentration without interruptions. Froebel then emphasised the relevance of bodily experience and play, which, as we know, can only take place in extended time (1867). Similarly, Dewey (1938/2014) claimed that it is precisely by giving children the autonomy and the freedom to make experience of the world that deep learning can occur. Contrary to the logic of curricular acceleration often witnessed at school, learning needs time and it is precisely in “slowing down” that the meaning of what is being done can be identified (Gola, 2021). In addition to the important insights that the use of the Kamishibai has opened about the use of time in educational settings, the importance of “giving time” to the educational relationship should be also considered. In this regard, it is interesting to reflect on how the temporal dimension of educational accompaniment requires two conditions to be met, which are availability and narrative competence. First, one of the most meaningful ways to care for someone is by offering them time – since authentic communication cannot thrive in haste or superficiality. Secondly, the role of the educator is to give the other the opportunity to tell her/himself, giving her/him the time to find the words, to have a voice, and while waiting patiently, allow her/him to identify their own life purpose (Bruzzone, 2016). The powerful idea is that by slowing down and truly experiencing time, meaningful things are allowed to unfold. This is a vital insight for shaping meaningful learning environments – for both children and adults alike.

3.4 Expressive Languages

Another notable theme that emerged in participants' reflections was the idea of *multiple expressive languages*. By its very nature, the Kamishibai is an instrument that combines the visual, the sonorous, the kinesthetics and can offer very personal possibilities of expression (Casadei, 2022). For example, in the conducted training one of the participants, an experienced musician, involved the members of his group in a search for more appropriate ways to add music to the narrative made of gestures, words, and illustrations. Questions such as: "Would it be possible to add a soundtrack to represent musically the chosen story? Which type of music? Continuous music or not to help the words and images?". Thanks to the possibility offered by the workshop with the Kamishibai, these stimuli found an expressive channel, managing to enrich the reading experience.

On a didactical level, this opens a reflection on the possibility that artistic activities have in accommodating different talents, inclinations, and abilities. The goal is to offer a broad spectrum of expressive modes, encouraging individuals to discover the languages that resonate most with their way of expressing and communicating (Tonucci, 1980; see Baroni, 2022). This allows those who participate to rediscover their sense of self-efficacy, thus increasing intrinsic motivation and more generally the pleasure "of putting oneself out there", which is relevant to the professionalisation of teachers (Bandura, 2000).

Thoughts such as: "I really appreciated the opportunity to create something that allows different arts and various artistic, linguistic, and literary fields to interact. I will carry this experience with me in my journey"; "From a personal point of view, it has given my artistic side the chance to grow and get involved" highlight the significant potential of creating spaces and activities like these. In fact, it is in an atmosphere of acceptance, of experimentation such as that of the workshop, where each participant can engage directly and gain deeper self-awareness (Casadei, 2017).

This offers the opportunity to reflect on the inclusive possibilities of the Kamishibai, which adopts a "multidisciplinary, multifaceted and inclusive language" capable of "dilating time, allowing it to repeat itself, to linger, modelling itself, differentiating itself and personalising itself on the specific

needs” of the learner, grounded in the appreciation of individual differences rather than their exclusion (Sgambelluri & Domenico, 2022).

4. Conclusion

This contribution represents a preliminary documentation of an adult educational experience with Kamishibai, and as such, it has certain limitations. The findings and reflections presented should be considered an initial exploration rather than a comprehensive analysis. Nonetheless, the experience has sparked several promising ideas and directions for future development.

One possible direction for expansion involves scaling the initiative through collaborations with schools and local organizations.. In this regard, a cycle of storytelling sessions was conducted in schools, and the training program was shared, with the involvement of participants, during dedicated events held by the Civic Library of Bressanone (Baroni et al., 2024). These events welcomed both children and adults, fostering intergenerational connections. Such initiatives highlight the value of embedding creative educational practices like Kamishibai into community and institutional contexts to enhance their pedagogical impact. Another meaningful path involves designing research-based training initiatives (Asquini, 2018) informed by the themes and insights gathered during this initial documentation. These efforts aim to deepen our understanding of the effects of training programs centered on Kamishibai’s pedagogical potential. Further analysis could reveal how imaginative and creative processes affect both educators and learners, offering deeper insight into their role in fostering inclusive educational environments. In summary, while this work represents only a starting point, it lays the groundwork for both practical extensions and more robust research endeavours. The reflections and outcomes documented here not only affirm the potential of Kamishibai as a pedagogical tool but also point to its broader implications for educational innovation and community engagement.

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