

AFRREV IJAH

An International Journal of Arts and Humanities

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 1 (1), February, 2012:217-226

ISSN: 2225-8590

From Theory into Practice: Theatre-in-Education and Child Transformative Development

Obadiegwu, Cyprian Chiduo, Ph.D.

Theatre Arts department

Faculty of Arts

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

duomoba@yahoo.com

Abstract

The primary goal of education is student learning for socio- political and economic development and all educators should bear the responsibility of making learning accessible to all children. Years of research has documented that theatre has a crucial role in the optimal growth, learning, and development of children from infancy through adolescent. Yet, this need is being challenged, and so children's right to play and learn must be defended by all educators. Theatre is dynamic process that is considered a key facilitator of learning and development across domain, and reflects the social and cultural context in which children live. This paper looks at the theoretical basis of dramatic activities as method of learning in the classroom situation.

Introduction

As today's children continue to experience pressure to succeed in all areas, the necessity for dramatic play becomes more crucial in achieving their educational needs. Education managers must support, respect, understand,

and advocate legitimizing play as an essential pathway to learning for all children. The impulse to play if properly channelled can become a continuing way of learning, a medium expression and a creative act (Oko-Offoboche, 1998, p.10).

‘Children unconsciously get easily involved in theatrical process, and this offers their developing minds genuine excitement’ (Salami: 2000). Salami states that ‘children’s performances in everyday play are ready materials for theatre, and can be easily structured into drama for entertainment and pedagogical purposes’ (p. 73). Play is one of the most powerful ways for a child to learn. He looks at the world around him and plays what he sees. He tries different ways of acting, assumes various roles and challenges himself with all sorts of problems (Koster, 1995). Dramatic play helps children prepare for life and cope with growing up. Since dramatic play is so innate in children, it should be carried on into the nursery and primary classrooms.

From theory into practice

Theorists, regardless of their orientations concur that theatre occupies a central role in children’s lives (Heathcote, 1980; Froebel, 1962; Lee, 1915). They also suggest that the absence of play is an obstacle to the development of healthy and creative individuals. When children engage in dramatic play they deepen their understanding of the world and develop skills that will serve them throughout their lives. Researches indicate that using drama in the classroom as a means of teaching helps students learn academically, socially and developmentally (Neelands, 1992; Garcia, 2000). In employing the use of drama in the classroom, it can reach students who otherwise couldn’t be reached, and challenge students who have already grasped the concepts. Drama provides a fun means of learning .It brings the affective back into the classroom, a situation where emotions and learning are categorically linked. When we connect to the concept emotionally, we will have a better understanding of it. When we teach using drama we are linking prior experience with new stimuli. Teaching using drama brings emotion and learning together. Most importantly of all, using drama to teach in kindergarten and primary classrooms get students involved and gives them the power to have a key role in their education. Wilhelm (1995) notes that “through drama, students become part of the learning process rather than mere observers or receptacles of the rich experience of learning. The basic requirement is that the issues to be treated have to come from the students, to allow them to identify with the topics and learn useful lessons (Kafewo,

2008). In this way, their learning was deeper, more sustained, and infinitely more transforming.

Gavin Bolton (1968) calls the form of drama used to teach in the classroom, “dramatic playing”. Dramatic playing is characterized by a high degree of spontaneity as teacher and students work to create a fictional world in which they assume roles to explore issues that are of concern to them. Most scholars in the area of Theatre-In- Education agreed that drama is the act of participant joining in an imagined world and taking roles of others. By doing so, students are able to learn through other perspectives and act as one would in the imagined situation. Bolton (1984, p.183) further explains that in educational drama the students have an active identification with the fictional context in addition to experiencing greater awareness of his/her own personal identification.

Plato, in *The Republic*, advocated play as a way of learning. Aristotle urged education in the arts, distinguishing between activities that were means and those that were ends (McCaslin, 1984:271). Many cultures have found using drama to teach moral and doctrines to be very successful. “The Medieval Church taught through the medium of mystery plays and in doing so helped to restore theatre to its proper place as a great art” (p.271).

Thus many psychologists have viewed drama as a way of learning. They found that drama provides a sound foundation for development (Vygotsky 1978). Bruner (1966) sees cognitive growth as dependent upon interactive play and upon children imagining themselves acting in worlds that are developmentally a bit above their actual physical and intellectual level. Both provide a solid foundation for using drama in the classroom as a way to deepen and enlarge understanding.

Gardner (1999) developed a theory of multiple intelligence which suggests that our school system which reflect our culture, teach, test, reinforce, and reward primarily two kinds of intelligence, verbal and logical. Gardner suggested that students learn in many different ways .We all have different intelligence that reflect how we lean and what interests us. If educators teach their students knowing that there are other intelligences beside verbal and logical, then students will have better chances of learning.

These intelligences include visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Dickinson, 2002).These intelligences provide the foundation for visual arts, music, dance, and drama, and through

these art forms most students will not only find the means for communication and self-expression, but the tools to construct meaning and learn almost any subject effectively.

Through Gardner's theory, it is evident that drama is a highly effective means of reaching students with intelligence that are not reached through traditional teaching methods. This intelligence is inherent in creative drama. Hopefully, using drama as teaching strategy will be the foundation for future developments of multi-intelligence teaching approaches.

Other theoretical viewpoints about educational drama emerge from the ideas of educators such as Courtney and Dewey. They say that learning happens through experience and active participation or as Dewey (1963) states, "learning by doing". Drama is a form of "learning by doing". Dewey also stressed the importance of imagination as the "gateway through which meanings are derived from past experience that are carried into the present". Creative drama is engrossed by the participant's use of imagination. The curriculum should integrate the imagination or aesthetic world with the cognitive world of the student. Dewey's 'learning by doing' theory shaped the progressive era in education.

Courtney (1974) believes that children must act out their thoughts with physical actions. Drama, which involves imaginative transformation and reflection on experiences, helps students expand their ability to act out thoughts in their minds. This skill is necessary for organizing thoughts and problem solving situations in everyday life.

Slade (1954) sees learning in terms of experience, the self, and interaction, rather than intellect, brain and isolation. Brian Way (1967, p.1) asserts that direct experience, transcending mere knowledge, enriches the imagination, possibly launching the heart and soul as well as the mind. Acting is doing, taking place in the "here and now". Theatre-In-Education is an active learning method. It facilitates learning for visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learners. It allows for increased retention because students are not simply learning/or seeing new information, but personally participating in it.

As a field of pedagogy, educational drama has been successfully employed to explore, shape and symbolically represent human experience. Educational drama refers to the process of learning through drama as distinct from learning about drama. Educational drama as described by Neelands (1998, p.4) is the direct experience that is shared when people imagine and behave

as if they were other than themselves in some other place at another time. The notion of drama as a learning medium has been used across a variety of cultures, fields and application (O'Toole, 2000). Central beliefs of the international Theatre-In-Education scholars are that theatre is a vitally important art that can be used to teach virtually anything and teach across curricula.

From theoretical perspectives, educational drama conventions seek the encouragement of meaningful learning and construction of knowledge. Discovery approaches to learning through methods such as drama as opposed to 'reception' learning (Ausubel, 1978); learning through exposition are advocated so that students discover what they need to know (Bruner, 1966, 1972). Such discovery by students themselves reinforces the meaning and relevance of ideas that are identified as fundamental for their learning about their environment.

Educational drama is characterized by involvement of the whole person; feelings, sense and the intellect; the recognition and use of learner's life experiences in order to create personal meaning and relevance of new learning. It is also characterized by continued reflection on prior experiences so as to build and transform deeper understanding (Andresen, Boud and Cohen, 2000; Dewey, 1963). Other unique advantages of educational drama include physical activity which is associated with the embodiment of learning, otherwise known as learning through bodily movement (Beaver, 1999; Boal, 1979; Wright, 1998), the engagement of emotion (Boud, 1996; Brookfield, 1990) and the removal of barriers to learning by introducing an element of play into a classroom situation (Leigh and Kinder, 1999).

In educational drama, children use their own lives as a springboard for values exploration because they can articulate their thought processes and make value decision with a clear understanding of the borders of right and wrong. Edmiston (1998, p. 591) explains the power for moral thought in drama for the simulation of possible moral act. Not only can students engage in talk about action, moral reasoning about what they might do if they were people in particular circumstance. In drama students take action and in imagination do that which in discussion they might only sketchily contemplate.

Slade's (1998) discusses the concept of drama as a lifelong experience rather than being a specific intervention. He believes that engagement in drama can lead to a long term learning experience. Schnapp and Olsen (2003) perceived communication and the empowering experience of group participation as being fundamental to the effectiveness of drama as an approach to developing self-advocacy. Implicit in their discussion is the assumption that engaging in the process of drama games and exercises involving physical, auditory and verbal elements enabled participants to gain confidence in their own ability.

It is important to note that educational drama values exploration takes a variety of forms dependent upon the age and development level of the child. In the nursery and primary grades storytelling and folk performances are used to educate the pupils. For instance, working with young nursery and elementary school aged children, one can use folktales to promote the aims of moral education through drama. The Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria, Children's Theatre Workshop (2010) work with elementary school children employed process drama with events from history and stories to promote tolerance and understanding. Fischer and Garrison (as cited in Wagner,1999:144) found that relationships among children improved significantly after role playing folk ideas from their environment, group discussions and role training with regard to cooperation and communication.

Thus every civilization has handed on to its children, from one generation to the other traditional types of folktales/games for their transformative development (Lowenfeld, 1972).These tales and games are designed as a traditional form of informal education. They exist for life's sake, multi-purpose functions for individual and group education. Of many functions of folktale performance, the most important is education of children. Folk performance serves as an inherent vehicle for intergenerational communication that prepares and assigns role and responsibility to different groups in the society (Murphy, 1978). Values are acquired through maintenance of and direct participation in folkloric activities. Through folkloric performances, education is not only acquired but lived through. They are more pedagogical devices deliberately composed to inculcate values into children with no formal instruction on what and what to do. Distilled folk materials validate values and beliefs, which are reinforced practically in adult life (Dorji, 2008).

Folktales and games make children imagine and create mental pictures, and this mental exercise leaves deepest impression on them, imprinting folklores right place in their imagination. Folk wit and wisdom are not taught through formal arrangement but through direct observation and participation in earlier stage. Listening to folktales transports the audience to a different world; later reflection connects the folktale world to the real world that they would face as adults. It is when they first understand and link these two worlds that values so imparted are used in their interactions with peers and physical world.

Folk materials are versions of creative drama; a valuable resources for education of children and for stimulating the development of other creative talents. The main goal of drama and African folktales is to address the all round development of children. Using it in the classroom will make students culturally aware of their heritage, therefore building their self-esteem (Abraham, 1983). It will give students universal foundation in their learning situation. Drama and African folk materials foster interpersonal relationships between students. The Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Children's Theatre workshops were design using folk materials to help teachers to explore the cultural heritage and learning needs of the pupils. The "acting out" of the folktales and games will allow students to exhibit appropriate type of social behaviour through creativity in order to learn. The purpose is to introduce the uses of theatre activities as effective and exciting learning tools.

Conclusion

Therefore, drama pedagogy can promote other ways of learning including grounded imaginative learning and knowledge, opportunities for intense participation, flow of aesthetic encounter, and working creatively with symbolic form. Educational drama is situated in the child's own experience and knowledge, and generates further knowledge and understanding. Thus there is no doubt theoretically that educational drama has potential as an empowering pedagogy for student transformative development, but very few educators use its full potential. When drama pedagogy is used in the classroom, the participants are challenged to find productive contexts for exploration that will engage them. Drama pedagogy creates opportunities for examining alternative solutions, engaging multiple intelligences and negotiation, collaboration, decision-making and reflective discussion. This drama approach to learning shows promise as a way forward to empowering children for their transformative development.

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