

## **Training Children Environmentalists in Africa: The Learning by Drama Method**

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**Abstract:** The world's attention has been drawn towards the urgent need for the preservation and maintenance of the environment as it is faced with the daunting phenomena called Global Warming and Environmental Degradation. The urgency for dealing with this situation is very much needed in Africa. This recent global challenge demands that everybody has to work together in checking the looming and preventable environmental disaster. In this light therefore, this paper attempts to bring to the fore some potentials that children as integral part of African society have to become environmentalists for the benefit of the present and future environmental preservation and development. Involving African children in environmental protection and development projects is a mission towards ensuring environmental development and sustainability. This paper frowns at the belief that African children are minors and therefore, should be left out of what is termed by adults as 'serious issues'. It argues that African children are symbols of the future in every society; therefore, any society that leaves them out of development issues is visionless. The germane concern of this paper is to explicate the pedagogy of how African children can be factored into veritable tools for environmental maintenance and sustainability via the learning by drama approach of Theatre for Development. One major finding in this research is that children can learn, understand, and appreciate intellectual issues concerning their environment, its preservation and protection. Children also demonstrated their potentials to impart knowledge about their environment to other children.

**Keywords:** Sustainable, Environment, Degradation, Children, Drama, Environmentalist, Preservation, Africa

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Adie Edward (2018) posited

that Development has often been perceived by many scholars as a positive shift or improvement in people's quality of life. It entails the ability of the individual or group of individuals to live up to the realization of their life's aspirations... the aggregate of such attainments is expected to make the world a better place..... in the pursuit of meaningful development, it is expected that all strata of the society are evenly represented in development agenda [1]

The role of theatre in charting the course of development in all spheres of life is not a strange reading in the records of world theatres. This fact has manifested in different precipitations of theatre nomenclatures such as Theatre in Education, Educational Drama, Community Theatre, Children's Theatre, Popular Theatre and recently, Theatre for Development (TFD). Whatever form or nomenclature a theatre practice takes; it one development practice that emphasizes the mass mobilization of rural masses, so that they come to actively participate in the theatre for the purpose of upgrading themselves intellectually and materially, so that they come to a thorough understanding of their environment and this helps them to master their environment and this mastery leads them to an understanding of the structures of their society. By this understanding, they, as a group, come to a full knowledge of the structures that are injurious to them and those that enhance their wellbeing as human beings. Theatre for Development as praxis is broad base; the practice can engage children in development issues. It is in this light therefore, that this paper explicates the use of theatre (TFD) amongst pupils of primary five and six of Unical Demonstration Primary School, University of Calabar, Calabar in Nigeria on environmental preservation and maintenance. The environmental issues addressed by this research are refuse dumping and tree preservation.

### **DEVELOPMENT AND SAFEGUARDING THE ENVIRONMENT**

Development as a concept has received so many varying and valid definitions from different development scholars. The understanding of what development is also varies from one society to

another. This is so because what may constitute development in community A may be otherwise in community B. This explains the relative nature of what development means to different people. However, scholars have interchangeably used words such as advancement, growth, progress and social change to equate what development stands for. Akaaer and Asen define development thus:

A continuous process of harnessing all the available human and material resources of a society in a way that it is compatible with the cultural expressions of the people, with the final goal of achieving a quality of living standard that is based on satisfaction, justice, equality, liberty, happiness, freedom and progress [2].

Development as a widely participatory process is aimed at bringing about social change and material advancement for the majority of people through their gaining control over their environment. Despite the numerous understanding of what development stands for, one very important discourse area in development field is how it can be sustainable. Sustainable development could be seen as that which ensures the totality of development plans, projects, policies and implementation of policies being able to last for a long time. This means that development projects, if they must be sustainable, should not endanger the present and future environments and generations.

According to the United Nations General Assembly's proclamation which enumerated the following as fundamental elements of development:

1. A minimum standard of living compatible with human dignity.
2. Underpinned improvement of well-being of the individual
3. Sharing of benefits by society at large
4. More equitable distribution of wealth and income, security and
5. The safeguard of the environment.

The last item on the above proclaimed criteria of development which is safeguard of the environment is the primary concern of this paper. Any process of development that undermines the safety of environment is doomed. To achieve the safeguard of environment, it is pertinent that all, including children should play vital roles in the participatory process. Srinivas and Leslie observed that there exists the idea of sustainable environment perspective whose view is that the maintenance of the biological diversity of plant is essential to the survival of humanity hence; development plan that does not prioritize environmental sustainability is doomed to fail [3]. By this standard, there is need for more young trees to be planted and preserved in our rural and urban habitats.

Today in Nigeria, it is evident that a lot of towns and cities are eye-sores with refuse dumps on the high ways, living areas, market squares, schools and even hospital premises. States such as Oyo, Lagos, Kano, Abia, Gombe and Enugu amongst many others are involved in spending huge amount of money to solve this disheartening menace. Despite government's efforts in providing refuse collectors and incinerators, the menace has been persisting till date. According to Bain, this persisting situation is as a result of population pressures, socio-economic and technological activities which have degraded the Nigeria environment [4]. Deforestation and desertification are highly prevailing in Nigeria and it is not just in Northern Nigeria, but also taking over the South. Desertification refers to a situation of gradual loss of forest which is as a result of people's bid to create new settlements, tree felling for commercial purposes and bush burning for hunting and the likes. The danger in this is that afforestation is not taken very seriously and the deforestation rate exceeds the capacity of nature to offer replacement.

In order to forestall this environmental disaster and pollution, this study advocates that children who are the symbols of the future should be factored into the struggle against environmental degradation, global warming and the attendant consequences. To ensure eco-development which will be sustainable, children who are the future leaders of any country should be exposed in this direction via learning by drama. This is in corroboration with Adie who puts it that "theatre operates through non-formal education that allows for learning amongst targeted audience with the aim of achieving sustainable problem solving capacities communities" [5].

## **CHILDREN AS REFUSE DUMPERS AND YOUNG TREE KILLERS**

The findings in this study have shown that children form a major group of people who engage in day to day waste dumping. They are sent by their adult parents, siblings, guardians and teachers to

dispose domestic waste from their homes and schools. In a dialogic engagement with pupils of primary five and six of Immaculate Primary School Calabar, the children were asked how they go about the disposal of waste in their homes and school. Some said that they dump the waste by the road side. Some said that they dump refuse in the gutter so that rain water can flush them away while some said they put refuse in bins. It was obvious that the number of children who dump refuse in the gutters or on the road side were more than those who claim to dump refuse in the bins. A primary six boy named Umoh admitted that whenever he was sent to dump refuse while he was hungry, he simply dumped the garbage behind their house near a bush.

The one week interaction with these children also revealed that, children in the process of playing ignorantly destroy young plants (trees) within their school premises and homes. They do this with some element of vigour and seriousness. This children's behaviour is explained by Freud's position that "the children's best loved and most absorbing occupation is play.; he arranges the things of his world and orders them in a new way that pleases him better" [6]. This observation of Freud explains why children see plants (young trees) as bushes and they try to destroy them by trampling or cutting them down.

### **FACTORIZING CHILDREN INTO ENVIRONMENTALISTS THROUGH DRAMA**

The idea of factorizing children into useful resources for achieving development has been written about by many scholars who dwelt much on children's roles in socio- economic and political development. This paper hinges on environmental protection and development by making a case for children to be empowered to contribute their quota in solving the problem of improper waste dumping and tree cutting/felling as the case may be. This can be achieved via the process of making children learn by drama. In a Children Theatre atmosphere, some children form part of the actors of the story while many take the position of spectators or spec-actors. According to Adie "Theatre for Development is a tool for 'conscientizing' both the core actors and the spec-actors, empowering them to chart a course towards solving some of their problems through self help" [1].

Courtney argues that the essential characteristic of man (children) is his creative imagination. It is that which enables him to master his environment in such a way that he overcomes that limitation of his brain, body and mental universes [7]. Creative Dramatics is an improvisational and non-exhibitioner process where children participants are guided by facilitators to imagine, enact and reflect upon human experience. This is what TFD does too. Winifred, cited in Courtney described creative drama as "...an improvisational form of drama which is not just meant for performance sake but for freeing and strengthening the child's mental and emotional powers". She argues further that creative dramatics is a form of drama which exists for the purpose of the child's participants [7]. This process can make children appreciate, understand and protect their ecology. In his own contribution, Dandaura explains that:

The challenges of ecological situation in Nigeria are enormous, judging by its population of approximately 150 million with an annual growth rate of 2.2%, about 25% of which lack toilet facilities and poor sewage system" (2008:459). He added further that theatre is capable of making people to understand and control their environment. In this light therefore, doing TFD with children on the issue of environment can translate into a veritable tool for engendering environmental protection and maintenance. This will enable children to negotiate and make experimentation with diverse solutions to environmental challenges [8].

Pre-industrial societies cherished things within the environment. Such things were trees, land, rocks, water bodies etc. But modern societies have modified the environment in the process of trying to satisfy wants or pursuits for vital instinctive urges necessary for survival. These inevitable processes have affected environment terribly and to take prospective measures, all with children carried along, should be involved in the campaign for safeguarding the environment. The idea of developing the creative powers of children in the struggle of protecting our environment hinges on the process of creative drama. Learning by drama for the purpose of development communication is a large area to explore. It is on this premise that this research is carried out.

## **GETTING STARTED WITH PRAXIS: THE METHODOLOGY**

Inspired by the scholarly works of Winifred Ward, John Adams and Viola Spolin who wrote extensively on creative dramas and children's theatre as tools for children to learn through the “free play” and “play way” approaches [9], the researcher chose to work with pupils of primary five and six of the Immaculate Conception School on the theme “Environmental Protection and Maintenance”. Paedo-centric education which is all about education from the child's point of view was the watchword of this method. The very first engagement was the visit to Immaculate School where the researcher sought permission from the Head Teacher and other staff of the school to carry out paedo-centric education through drama with the primary 5 and 6 pupils. It was a kind of preliminary visit, advocacy and familiarization with the authorities and the pupils. This is in consonance with Abah's position which opines that advocacy is necessary for any workshop agenda and to seek support from the collaborating bodies towards the success of the programme [10].

The second engagement was to familiarize with the pupils in order to break the ice and get the best out of them. This is important because most children don't feel free with strange people. In an open arena provided by the school, the researcher introduced himself to the pupils, told them what he had come to do (mission). In turn, a good number of the pupils also introduced themselves. This was done in the presence of their teachers which made the pupils relaxed. Games and exercises which children like so much were also introduced and this helped in putting the children in the best state of mental and physical commitment to the process. It was observed that pupils who were shy initially, gradually broke out of their shells and became active and participating. This method conforms to viola's position on the importance of theatre games and exercise for children [11].

Fourth encounter with the children was impressive because the children rushed out of their classes to meet their new friend (the researcher) who was accompanied by five students of the Department of Theatre and Media Studies of the University of Calabar. The children gathered in their large numbers to participate both actively and passively. This is in agreement with Adie's position that “theatre has the capacity to bring people together, engage them in a pedagogic and learning process” [12]. The paedocentric education philosophy was put into play at this point as theorized by Sir John Adams. Going by this, the facilitators initiated the discussion on refuse dumping and importance of trees to the environment and human beings. The children started raising their hands to contribute to the issue. They were allowed one after the other to speak for as much as we could take.

## **PUPILS RESPONSES ON THE ISSUE OF REFUSE DUMPING**

For the convenience of this paper, ten (10) out of numerous responses to the question ‘How Do You Dump Refuse from Your House?’ from the children are presented below:

- “When my daddy send me to throw some dirty away, I will throw them on the road in front of our house and car will come and match it”. (sic)
- “I can throw the dirty things in the gutter when rain wants (sic) to fall. We use to throw dirty away in the night”.
- “There is one bush near our house, so, so we use to throw away dirty there”.
- “All of us in our house use to throw dirty inside the refuse bin on the road”.
- “We use to throw it on one place and our father will burn it”.(sic)
- “Some ‘Aboki’ use to come to our house and help us to throw dirty things away and my father will give them money”.
- It is my sister who use to go and throw rubbish away and I don't know the place” (sic).
- “My mother use to put dirty in one bag and she will put it inside her car boot and throw it far away”.
- “If you throw rubbish anyhow, my father will beat you”.
- “Cross River State don't like people to be putting refuse anyhow. They will catch any body that puts dirty on the road”.

## **RESPONSES FROM PUPILS ON THE ISSUE OF PROTECTING TREES AND PLANTING TREES (WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT TREES?)**

Theatre presents the ground for discussion and learning over given subjects. Adie opines that “theatre as a process for development is a very carefully planned intervention towards enabling people to identify their problems, discuss them and proffer solutions to them in a participatory manner”[13].

In the light of this, the students were engaged in a pedagogic process as exemplified below:  
For the purpose of this paper also, ten (10) responses from pupils are presented:

- “Trees can “wound” you when you are running”.
- “Trees can make our environment cool and people can sit under trees”
- “Trees make our city to be like bush or village”.
- “People use to cut trees and make firewood”
- “We can use it for our furniture”.
- “Some trees use to produce fruits like mango and orange”.
- “Trees can bring snake to our environment”.
- “Trees use to cause darkness”.
- “Trees is not good” (sic).
- “The leaves of trees use to make our environment dirty when they fall down”.

### **ARRIVING AT THE DRAMA STORYLINE WITH THE CHILDREN**

The responses of the pupils on refuse dumping and the importance of trees were critically discussed with the children in full participation. Responses that the facilitators deemed to add up were elaborated and responses which were found incorrect or partially correct were also given clarifications amidst the pupils’ arguments and counter arguments. At this point, all grey areas on the two issues were made clear and the children were notified that all they had said and the contributions of the facilitators would be put into drama sketches. This announcement made a lot of the pupils happy as they were interested to act or play as they often called it. This level of interaction is very important as it provides an avenue for children and adult facilitators to brainstorm. It was observed at this interface level that children really want to be heard as they do everything within their powers to get the attention of the facilitators in order to air their views. This level of dialogic interface is an end in itself as children are allowed to air their views, make arguments and counter-arguments. It is a paradigm shift on its own that can initiate behaviour change. Okwori buttress this position when he captured TFD thus: ...addresses local issues, through this, people gain new perspective of themselves and their situation and desire to discuss them with others through these discussions and sharing of ideas on the issues and problems, people begin to work strategies for practical action [14].

After a careful analysis of all the children (pupils) had said (data collected), with the aid of the facilitators, the drama sketches were developed with the children as the actors and actresses. At this point, the facilitators allowed the children to communicate at their own level and pace of grammar. This is quite necessary because it was observed that an attempt to enforce sophisticated grammatical expression on them proved unproductive. At this point, three major information derived from the pupils were enacted very briefly by some children cast while other children watched the enactments which were highly improvisational.

### **FIRST ENACTMENT (DUMPING REFUSE ON THE ROAD)**

Umoh moves towards the road holding a waste basket containing refuse. He dumps the contents in the middle of the road. (Charis approaches).

Charis: Hei! Umoh, is that place the waste bin? Why are you dumping dirty things on the road?

Umoh: Don't you know that all the motors that pass will match it and you will not see them again?

Charis: Even if the car matches it, the place will still be dirty and smelling. And this bad smell can cause disease for people who are living near here.

Edet: ooh! I am sorry. I don't know that before, I will not do so again.

Eka: Promise?

Umoh: Yes, I promise!

### **SECOND ENACTMENT-DUMPING REFUSE IN THE GUTTER**

(An improvised gutter,) Ito is seen dumping refuse in it. (She turns to move away quickly as Ushie meets her half way).

Ushie: Ito, how are you?

Ito: I am fine. Bye-bye Ushie: (Ushie holding her by the shirt)

Ushie: come, see

Ito: What now?

Ushie: What you have just done is very bad.

Ito: What did I do?

Ushie: You dumped refuse in this gutter.

Ito: Yes now! See, rain wants to fall, it will flush it away.

Ushie: No! no! no! Listen, the gutter is only meant for rain water to pass and not for refuse. As you have dumped now, if other people come and dump, it will block the gutter and water cannot pass again (He turns to the children audience) when this water can't find its way, it will divert to our houses and farms. It will destroy properties, plants and even people's lives.

(Turns to Ito) you see, it is dangerous to dump refuse in the gutter my friend.

Ito: Please forgive me all of you (pointing at the children audience) I am ashamed of what I did. I will not do it again.

### **LAST ENACTMENT ON THE DESTRUCTION OF YOUNG TREES BY CHILDREN**

(At the edge of a classroom block, Emma is seen trampling on a young tree plant. He tramples on it over and over again with serious playful vigour).

Ojoma: (shouting from the pavement) stop, stop!! Emma, can't you see that that is a mango plant? Why are you trying to destroy it?

Emma: Is this a mango plant? I thought that it is just a bush plant and I am playing with it.

Ojoma: No this is mango. It was planted by somebody, maybe our teacher. It will grow and produce mango fruits for us to pluck and eat.

Emma: Ok. What of this one? Can I destroy it (pointing to another plant)

Ojoma: No! It's not good to be destroying plants.

Emma: Is this one mango too?

Ojoma: No, it is not. But when it grows, it will provide shade like (pointing at the big tree at the heart of the school) that one. (Now joined by Ubong).

Ubong: (addressing the children audience) our teacher also told us that trees are important for our survival. She said, trees produce oxygen which we breathe in and protect our houses from storm. Thank you. (End of enactments).

### **EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD THROUGH PLAY**

The primary root of all educative activity is in the instinctive impulsive attitudes and activities of the child and not in the presentation and application of external material, whether through the ideas of others or through the senses; and that, accordingly, numberless spontaneous activities of children, plays, games, mimic efforts are capable of educational use, nay are the foundation-stones of educational methods [7].

The instinctive and impulsive attitude of children, when put into drama as a communication mode is very educational and instructional to themselves who are acting and to other children watching the play. When children play, play games and mimic other people, (impersonation) it is capable of providing strong educational instrument for development purpose. The child's drama, aside being an art form on its own, it is a dramatic activity which is a method for human beings to assimilate experience and use the knowledge for bettering themselves and their environment. In fact, acting is a sure and veritable way to learn. In this light therefore, all involved in the process of this research, from interacting and familiarizing with children, up, unto the creative process and to the play have provided education for development for the children. In this way, they have imbibed the attitudes which are positive in their plays and could discard the negative attitudes in their plays, thereby moulding themselves into environmentalists for the benefit of the present and the future environmental development.

### **CHALLENGES**

Working with children could be very herculean as a result of their inconsistencies and poor attention span. To get them coordinated was indeed a great challenge. Facilitators had to repeat one thing over and over again to get results.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

(a) It should be made statutory that children in all primary schools in Nigeria be exposed to environmental protection activities.

(b) TFD as a practice should engage in working with children. TFD should not be restricted to rural and urban poor adults.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper submits that beyond the entertainment value of theatre, drama in the paedo-centric approach could go a long way towards moulding children who are the future leaders into responsible environmentalists in our bid to safeguarding the environment.

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