Review

Utilizing drama in the teaching of environment issues to primary School Pupils

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As the problem of environmental irresponsibility gains greater focus in international discourses, the need has arisen to take its message to the young. This is predicted on the fact that if children are inculcated with environmental consciousness early enough, the possibility of environmental awareness and the urge to maintain environmental responsibility could be higher than it is. But the method of impartation becomes an issue, especially when the fact remains that young minds need something spectacular and eventful, to create lasting impressions. This essay proposes the utilization of drama as the methodology in imparting lasting lessons on the environment on the young persons, especially at primary levels of formal education

Key words: Environment, children, drama, play, role-playing.

INTRODUCTION

The state of the environment has become one of the most topical issues in our world. The degradation of the environment raises great fear about the future of the world and indeed, the human race. That is why various fora at international and local levels have been convened, to sensitize humanity on the need to save the environment.

Different parts of the world are experiencing the adverse effect of human recklessness in the usage of the earth's natural resources. In the arid areas of the world, the desert frontiers are fast expanding, engulfing even areas of hitherto–savannah vegetation. A great percentage of this is due to the indiscriminate felling of trees within the savannah, (especially along the fringes of the desert areas) and the utter disregard for the campaign for the re-planting of trees. Since the top soil can not be held together through the existence of trees, the attempts by the deserts to acquire further territories meet with no resistance. The wetlands of the world are also seriously plagued by environmental degradation. As woodlands and forests are destroyed through human activities of wood logging and bush burning, the great waters that fringe such areas find the deforested lands loose frontiers for successful raids. And before long, such locations are washed away by surging waters. Erosion, a serious menace of the non-arid zones, is aided ignorantly by cultivation and excavation activities in erosion–prone locations. The results have been landslides and complete washing – away of landed ecological locations, and communities.

In his elements of Nigerian environmental laws, Ogba (2000) divides the causes of environmental problems into direct and indirect causes. The indirect causes are natural causes, while the direct causes are human-induced.

The reality of the present situation is that unless something drastic is done to replenish the losses in the ecosystem; the world would meet a disaster that is better imagined than experienced. The continuous depletion of the ozone layer and the attendant release of heat on the earth could lead to the de-freezing of the water block at the Polar Regions which would cause a flood of unimaginable magnitude. Indeed, an increased intensity of heat on the earth’s surface is not conducive for any form of habitation – human, animal and plants. The present level of reckless felling of trees spells a disastrous situation where wood could become scarce in many communities of the world. Cultivation at erosion–prone sites like slopes of streams and ravines has proved a continuous encouragement of erosion and landslides
in communities in South-East and South-South Nigeria. The stubborn and unpatriotic disposal of refuse into drainages, especially in the urban centres have shown the people in towns like Uyo, that rain water could devastate while searching for passages, especially where it has been deprived of its designated routes.

The story of dried streams in the rural areas is a popular one. These are direct results of human activities: through unfriendly environmental system of roads construction and disposal of waste materials into flowing streams. As at now, almost the entire land waters in Lagos State are highly polluted. Many rivers of note in the past, in various parts of Nigeria are drying up because of the amount of wastes deposited on their courses by their upstream communities.

Dare Babarinsa, a popular magazine columnist in Tell magazine (2002: 5) laments the reckless hunting and poaching activities in the western part of Nigeria, which has led to the near-extinction of wild animals.

"Now, the tigers are gone, like the elephants, the leopards, the lions and thousands of other rare and special animals that God had given this land. If you get to Okemesi this week, the only tiger you will find are those in school textbooks".

He further touches on the issue of bush burning, asserting rather ominously: 'the past is burnt out and the future is still burning'. This statement, although specifically alluding to the wild bush fires that have become common features in the developing countries, encapsulate the reckless expense at which today's man has utilized available natural resources, and the disastrous future that awaits a posterity whose forebears consumed all, without a corresponding attitude to planting for the future. The need to plan and reserve for the future forms the basis of the global concern for sustainable development. And according to Lester (1991),

'If we are to fashion a promising future for the next generation, then enormous efforts required to reverse the environmental degradation of the planet will dominate world affairs for decades to come'.

The severity of the global environmental problem demands that the issue be tackled in an inter-disciplinary manner. It also points to the need for the enunciation of creative ideas that would take the message of environmental salvaging to persons of different classes and ages, as according to Babasola (1996) the problem "demands the urgent and proper sensitization of everyone".

The reference to 'everyone' here would appropriately mean anyone capable of some level of self-thinking and expression. And this would include children and infants at the primary level of education. This project is therefore focussed on the environmental sensitization of persons in this group.

CHILDREN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The proper orientation of children on environmental issues has become imperative. One of the reasons for this need is based on the fact that children are still being used as agents of environmental degradation in many parts of the world. They are the ones mostly sent on errands that include destruction of shrubs and trees, deposition of refuse into gutters and water sources. They ignoranty engage in activities like bush burning to trap animals. Although it could not be advocated that they start refusing being used for such environmentally—unfriendly errands, as this would be immoral, it is believed that their high level of environmental consciousness could influence the thinking of their parents and family members. Thus, even these little ones could become agents of positive environmental advocacy of some sort, in their communities.

But more importantly, the place of children as the adults, policy formulations and implementers of the future, makes their acquisition of environmental awareness at this early age, an investment in future environmental friendliness. In the words of Justina (2002: 134):

"Child education exposes the child at a very tender age to issues affecting the child’s existence that he might learn to adapt and imbibe new systems of doing things as dictated by the environment within which he finds himself"

These young persons in the primary and nursery schools are the leaders of the next generation. They might have no generation to lead if nothing is done fast and effectively about the preservation of the world that sustains every living generation. The dangerous slide in the world’s environmental condition has to be laid bare at their feet. It is one of the duties the environmentally conscious adults of the moments, owe to these youngsters who are investors in the world of the future.

The entrenchment of sustainable development consciousness in the child is therefore not only capable of making environmental sustenance a topical discourse in families and homes, but also inculcating the awareness in parents, guardians and leaders of the future.

DRAMA IN ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION

Drama is one of the veritable tools that can be utilized as part of the "enormous effort required to reverse the environmental degradation of the world" (Lester, 1991). Drama is a communal communication activity. It intensifies the experience of the participant (actor/actress
or audience participant) and is capable of advancing the knowledge of the person beyond his familiar scope and surroundings. Jide (1984) describes drama as one “of the most powerful media of mass communication” Drama is an effective and intensive informant by virtue of the natural rule that what one hears, he might forget, and what one sees, he remembers. Drama takes its raw materials from life experiences. It is therefore a representation of life on stage, a presentation of societal living in micro form, on stage. As a communication medium, drama is an extensive informant, a vibrant entertainer and profound educator. Its capability to combine role playing, costumes, scenery etc. makes it an attractive medium that easily endears itself to the participants – the performers and the audience – members.

As a communal communicative activity, drama is a highly participatory activity. The urge and the act of participating is the life-force that sustains drama in a group. The use of drama in educational activities is therefore a promotion of group consciousness, a phenomenon that seems to be in very low quality in our individualistic, mercantile world. And environmental friendliness is essentially a communal demanding activity. The call for sustainable development is a clarion call for the replacement of selfish individualistic instincts in the usage of natural resources, with a patriotic societal habit of ensuring the continuous availability of these resources for succeeding generations.

CHILD DRAMA

Except in presentational situations, child drama is not exactly like adult drama. Where it is purely used for classroom teaching, it is far from being theatre. Rather, it is a creative activity.

“It provides a medium through which the individual can express his ideas-his reactions to the impressions he receives – and by expressing them, learn to evaluate them”. (Femi et al., 1999: 82)

And it is through this process that impressions that seemed vague are understood, where fragmentary knowledge had existed, the gap become filled and issues that were considered dreadful, are overcome.

And child drama is a participatory activity. There are artificialities of real theatrical situations. The participant is allowed the freedom to create and express his ideas and situations. And the creation of environmental awareness is a highly participatory affair. It demands the contribution of ideas to the process of stemming the tide of environmental degradation.

Discovery is an important aspect of child education. It is natural for the child to be inventive and explorative, and thereby discover. In a child drama situation, the discovery consciousness of the child is employed to the fullest as the child is allowed to dramatize, improvise on real life situations by himself and come out with the realistic result. Such results are indelible and impacting. A child exposed to the method on environmental issues is capable of growing-up as an already convinced personality on the need for environmental preservation.

Drama can best be utilized in environmental communication in primary schools on two fronts: the drama in education approach and the drama presentation approach. While the first deals with the use of drama in classroom situations, the other entails its utilization as a distinct item in the school’s extra-curricular activities calendar.

DRAMA IN EDUCATION APPROACH

From the ancient days, drama has been identified as a veritable part of the ideal education system. Plato (1974), one of the triumvirates of Greek ancient philosophers, asserts that education must be based on play and not compulsion. In spite of his aversion for drama or mimetic arts, he considers the dramatic method of lesson presentation as the easiest way to impart knowledge. However, the formulation of the basic idea of employing dramatic activity as an effective method for learning was largely due to Cook (1991) (Richard, 1974).

The drama in education approach to utilizing drama in environmental education at the primary school level could be subdivided into the play way (dramatic) method, the creative movement method, and the creative drama method.

The playway (dramatic) method

Cook holds that acting is a sure way to learn. His method is based on three basic principles:

1) That proficiency as well as learning does not come from reading and listening but essentially from action, doing and experiencing.
2) That good work is more derivable from spontaneous effort and freely expressed interest than coercion and compulsion.
3) That the natural method of learning in young persons is through play.

The employment of this method would entail the use of play or dramatization of the environmental issues in the social studies curriculum. Much better than this, would be the introduction of a subject titled “Environmental studies” which should be independent of any other existing subject at the nursery and primary educational levels.

A lesson on tree-planting and with the message “for each tree felled, plant five”, could be dramatized thus: three different men go to the bush at different times and come
back with wood. The first person sells the wood as timbre, the second uses it as firewood and the third uses it to construct a house. A carpenter in the community later needs wood for his chores but can hardly find any as all the big trees are gone. He then goes to the city to buy wood exorbitantly, and hikes the prices of his products; house doors, windows, lockers etc. Erosion also sets into the previous site of the village woodlot and threatens farms and the entire community. The village starts experiencing a high intensity of heat. The entire village is agitated. One of their sons returns from the university and is alarmed at the unsafe situation in the village. He enlightens them on the need for a concerted effort at replacing felled trees with newly-planted ones. The entire village agrees that from then on, every indigene should plant five trees for one felled. This type of playlet could also be replicated to represent a village which meets a near-disastrous situation as a result of intensive and indiscriminate cultivation around erosion-prone areas like the slopes of the village stream, and defecation into communal water sources.

All the roles in the dramatized stories have to be played and improvised by the children, under the supervision and guidance. This makes it possible for the children to have a real “feel” of the environmental situation depicted, and be a part of the process of resolving the environmental problems that arise from the spate of individual and communal degradation. The “essential and recurring feature of all schools’ drama work is that it involves children, as participants, projecting into imagined or assumed roles or situations. Fundamentally acting out involve people making an imaginative leap from their actual situation or roles into a supposed one” (McGregor, 1978: 11).

It is necessary to discuss the role of the teacher in the usage of this method. Since the participation and quasi-independence of the child is of utmost importance in the circumstance, the teacher should restrain himself to the role of an observant guide, maintaining discipline and directing “the child’s play into channels where he needs to make worthwhile decisions and discoveries” (Femi et al., 1999: 86).

The teacher is thus an umpire, a referee and detached participant or an involved arbitrator. His job is to encourage the child to ‘deepen and challenge his perceptions of himself and his world so that he gradually begins to make sense of the complexities and subtleties of his experience’ (McGregor, 1978: 23).

Through this, the child accepts the issues and problems of his world and reappraises his world-view in the face of plausible information.

Creative movement method

The experience of movement in school involves activities like physical education games, dance and drama. Rudolf (1948) espouses the concept of modern educational dance as a form of expression through movement where “the richness of liberated movement – from gestures and steps, as well as in the use of movements which contemporary man uses in his everyday life”.

Dance drama has become one of the popular features of major societal programme launchings in Nigeria. Such occasions include the launching of the War Against Indiscipline (WAI), MAMSER, National Immunization Days (NID), Tree Planting Campaign etc. Although, such activities are bereft of depth and sustenance beyond these ceremonious launchings, the inclusion of dance dramatic slots in the programmes of these events point to the acceptance of dance drama as a profound communicator. Indeed, Chris (1999:142) testified that “arts have not been left out of the debate generated by problems of the environment. Dramatists, choreographers, painters, sculptors and designers have all turned their attention on the environmental related issues as subject matter”.

In our school system, dance performances constitute a major extra-curricular activity. The need has therefore arisen for the injection of environmental information into these dances, adapting the known forms into dance dramas. A female dance troupe in a school could be made to enact, through dance, a story where women go to the village stream and return without water. They all move to complain to the village chief who joins in bemoaning the fate of the community. A sanitary inspector or a son of the village comes home on leave and witnesses the predicament. But on a visit to the site of the sealed stream, he discovers that the people have been stuffing their source of water with the weeds from their farms and other waste materials, and that is why the stream could no more flow. The village is made to know why they are facing the hardship, and what they should do to salvage the situation.

It is necessary to state here that stories for dance dramatic performances should be straightforward and simple.

Creative drama method

This method is based on Peter Slade’s publication – Child Drama (1954), in which he submits that child drama could be a part of the school curriculum just as Music, Arts, Literature and other subjects. The creative drama method advocates the introduction of drama as a separate subject in schools. One of the major thrusts of this method is inculcation of a sense of role playing and improvisational techniques in children between the ages of 5 and 7. The method could also be used in environmental education, through the injection of environmental themes in the stories being acted out. During such sessions, children could be made to play various roles. For instance, while a child playing the role...
of a wood seller is cutting down a tree, another ‘man’ appears to educate him on why he should not just be felling trees without a corresponding planting attitude, as his action would eventually lead to the depletion and extinction of the community woodlot and other associative after-effects of environmental degradation.

These methods are capable of creating in the minds of the children in school, an environmental consciousness which if kept alive through other sustained societal environmental sensitization processes, is capable of engendering an effective evolutionary change in our environmental habits.

THE DRAMA PRESENTATION APPROACH

The approach deals essentially with the use of the school play, an activity that has been part of most schools' activities for decades. In some places, it is a yearly or termly activity in which the public community participates. Some Nigerian primary schools hold parents’ day celebrations a ceremonious occasion where the educational institution and the host community meet to celebrate their symbiotic relationship. During occasions like this, the school can present short drama sketches on the environmental problems of the community. Such sketches should embody the causes of the problems, the effects and the suggestive changes needed to forestall further degradation or cause a repair of the deplorable situation. The school, in this sense, has stepped into the social responsibility of an environmental ‘evangelist’, to the community. This, of course, is as it should be, because the school, no matter its level (primary, secondary, tertiary) is supposed to be an agent of change in the community it is located. Sometimes, the school authority could decide to assign itself the responsibility of following-up on the messages of such play presentations as a means of concretizing real positive environmental changes in the community.

Establishment of environmental clubs

Young persons love group activities. They are therefore enthusiastic members of Boys Scout Movement, Girls Guide, Boys Brigade, Red Cross Society, Red Crescent and church choirs etc. This social propensity could be further exploited through the establishment of Environmental Clubs in primary schools. The club should have a dedicated teacher as patron or adviser. The presentation of drama sketches during parents’ day celebrations could be the responsibility of the schools’ Environmental Clubs. And the follow-ups earlier mentioned could also be the undertakings of the members of this club. Such follow-ups could entail meetings with the Village Chief and council, and even the entire community to drive home the message of the club.

These efforts definitely put the school in the vanguard of theatre for development (TFD), one of the contemporary experimental attractions in the world of drama.

Besides this, the school, could also hold once-in-a-while get – together (possibly at the end of terms) for its staff and pupils. During such occasions, some classes or the environmental club could be asked to present drama sketches that touch as environmental issues. The sketches could be followed by short comments by members of staff as a means of explaining or emphasizing what has been seen on stage.

LANGUAGE

In all these approaches and methods, the language should be that which is capable of being understood by a greater majority. It should be the children's language the product of the improvisational creativity of the children role players under the relaxed guidance of the teacher. As mush as possible, the teacher should restrain himself/herself from imposing speeches or dialogue on the kids. He/she should play only a regulatory role in both the conception of the plot and the externalization processes in the plays.

Drama employs both verbal as well as non-verbal communication elements. While the verbal symbols should be popularly understood, the non-verbal cues should be decent and incapable of evoking racial and ethnic misunderstandings. The plays should be enactments of simple and straightforward, stories that should be realistic and believable.

CONCLUSION

The process of attitudinal change, especially for persons who have already been “focused” in a particular way of living, is not an easy one. But for young minds who are still trying to form values about life, the early inculcation of correct environmental information is capable of creating a more environmentally – friendly person. Since these young persons cannot energize themselves in this regard, the responsibility of putting them through becomes that of their teacher and the education policy formulators. Teachers, as persons who are directly involved in the moulding of young minds could become agents of environmental advocacy. They and the young minds they groom, owe the environment a grave responsibility a great part of which is the sanity and safety of our world, and the continuity of the human race. They have a tool – a potent tool in drama. They should proceed to employ it in the social responsibility of shaping for humanity, young persons who would not only grow into environmentally – responsible citizens, but also agents of change from a degraded to a sustainable world environment.
REFERENCES