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Drama and Cognitive Development in Young Children: A Study of a Unizik Applied Theatre Project in Demonstration School, Awka, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Study Background: There is no doubt that cognitive awareness and functionality are critical components in holistic human development. The need for educational establishments in Nigeria to adopt particular and learner-focused techniques to tackle the dearth of abstract and solution-based thinking in children is imperative for the achievement of sustainable development goals.

Aim of the Study: The objective of this paper is to espouse on the engagement of dramatic techniques within learning processes as an interventionist medium in promoting, sustaining and even improving positive psychosocial activities among children.

Theoretical Perspective: The study underscores scholarly positions of Vygotsky's theory of Metacognition and Self-regulation as well as the import of dramatic engagements in enhancing transformative educational programs.

Methodology: The qualitative research method is adopted for this study. An applied theatre project, titled *The Reward for Cleanliness* is analysed as the primary source of data.

Findings and Conclusion: The study found that a proper and well researched application of dramatic engagements within educational efforts and beyond is most instructive in providing context and rallying needed action on different areas of child development.

Keywords: Drama, Metacognition, Self-regulation, Applied theatre, Art therapy.

Introduction

The quest towards the attainment of qualitative and holistic child education is one that has always been confronted with issues along the lines of philosophy as well as socio-cultural constructs. However, it behoves of educational establishments to make adequate use of resources available to them in raising fully developed individuals that would improve living conditions for themselves and generations coming after them (Bat'Or, Ishai, Levi, 2014).

In many countries across the world, communal values and practices continue to influence responses to aspects of governance, health, technology and education. The ability therefore for institutions to harness

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historical and cultural factors so as to create solution-based and implementable policies per time, is critical to human development. One of such areas of development is that of cognitive awareness and functionality. This goes beyond the ability for individuals to be sensorily aware of their immediate environment, but the capability to think through and provide better alternatives for present societal circumstances that limit improved experiences in different spheres of life. Sultan Kiline and Kathleen Farrand in their submission on the cultural-historical influences on human activity, submit that, "human action is conceptualized as object oriented which is mediated by tools, rules, community and division of labour" (Butler, Bakker, Viljoen, 2013). Thus, while it can be said that institutions such as schools can constitute themselves as "communities" capable of inducing societal change, it is also pertinent to note that the larger community has tremendous influence due to the various socio-cultural tools available to it especially in shaping aspects of child development.

The engagement of drama in psychosocial development and even rehabilitation in some cases, is not an entirely new area in academic discourse. Concepts such as Movement Drama, Psychodrama, Rehab Dramatics and others propose for the effective infusion of dramatic and other collaborative activities in stimulating qualitative response from targeted individuals in the society (Chin-lee, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Metacognition and Self-Regulatory Development in Children

There are views that cognitive development in children is just as crucial and beneficial as other components for holistic child development. Indeed, some scholars and psychologists propose that children develop in stages and these stages equip the child with needed experience to understand and interpret their world (Emunah, 1994). The need for proper psychological development appears imperative and is figured to allow for a keen sense of self awareness and consequently, action. The concept of Metacognition, thus, proposes a turning point in the understanding of the mind such that developing children can be assisted to be more aware of their own thought processes so as to allow them gain control and mastery over the organisation of their learning. Robert fisher (1994) opines that:

> *Metacognitive thinking is a key element in the transfer of learning. The child's development of metacognitive skills is defined as meta-learning. Meta-learning strategies can help mediate the meta-cognitive skills of children and help to stimulate children's metacognitive thinking Robert fisher* (Fisher, 1994).

Psychologists such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, William James and many others have theorized on the importance of growing children manifesting cognitive development at certain stages. Vygotsky, views Metacognition and Self-regulation in child development as primarily a sense of consciousness, which requires the ability of abstract thinking as well as controlled attention. He proposes that we use consciousness to denote awareness of the activity of the mind; that is, "the consciousness of being conscious" (Kilinc, Farrand, Chapman, Kelly, 2017).

For scholars like Vygotsky, Metacognition intones an awareness of the structure of one's own thought process and how to direct and control one's thought with use of variables like signs, figures, language, performance and so on. This knowledge thus provides the capacity for reflective and abstract thinking which is required for the formation of systemized concepts and guided action. Other thrusts to the Vygotskian view on Metacognition, acknowledges the place of mental strength or the lack thereof within the framework of learning in developing children especially as it concerns formal educational environments, institutions such as schools provide. Fisher (1998) observes that:

> *Vygotsky was one of the first to realize that conscious reflective control and deliberate mastery were essential factors in school learning. He suggested there were two factors in the development of knowledge, first its automatic unconscious acquisition followed by a gradual increase in active conscious control over that knowledge, which essentially*

marked a separation between cognitive and metacognitive aspects of performance (Fisher, 1998).

The fact that children would not hesitate to accept the challenge of making a number of complex choices, suggests that they do not yet know their own capacities and limitations; they therefore appear to operate with complex tasks in the same way they would operate simple ones. However, since effective learning and development is not only a matter of innate intelligence, the tendency for appropriate knowledge to be illusive remains apparent. Children with such challenges according to some studies may find it difficult opening up to new learning. Thus, the need to integrate effective learning strategies that would not only increase knowledge in children but also increase intelligent approaches to learning, appears necessary. Further studies also contend that age, experience, and proper guidance are useful denominators in the concept of Metacognition. Lev Vygotsky cited by Wertsh, J.V submits that.

> *The development of the processes that eventually result in concept formation begins in earliest childhood. But the intellectual function that is a specific combination from the psychological basis of the process of concept formation ripens, take shape and develop only at puberty* (Wertsh, 2007).

Similarly, Flavell, again cited by Fisher (1998) suggests that:

> *Metacognitive ability changes with age and older children are more successful learners because they have internalized a greater quantity of metacognitive information. The failure to use these strategies however may not be related so much to age but to experience and that teacher's intervention can help even young children to develop some of the meta components that are the strategies of successful learning* (Fisher, 200).

Thus, the environmental structure of formal and informal institutions of learning as well as the guidance of the facilitators presents as critical factors to the discourse of cognitive development in children. Even though scholars like Vygotsky believe that the capacity for Metacognition is not fully achieved until adolescence and that reflective and abstractive concept formation become possible at this stage (Normann, Lonfeldt, Reiholdt-Dunne, 2015). There are equally similar views that the mastery of abstractive and advanced complex thinking through certain activities and with the guidance of skilled facilitators, should enable the child to progress quite easily to the formation of genuine concepts. Indeed, children master the rules for directing their own attention, thought and behaviour and they internalize this direction in the form of verbal self-stimuli, but this mastery does not become fully viable until the child becomes capable of thinking about the rules himself. To this end, the controlled environment as provided by institutions such as schools and education centers, become elementary to the development of healthy metacognitive attention and ability in children. Wertsh further reports that:

> *The school child, though growing steadily in awareness and mastery of such functions as memory and attention, is not aware of his conceptual operations. Exposure to school tasks and the repeated practice they provide, promotes the development of metacognitive knowledge about the child's own thinking* (Wertsh, 2019).

As an intervention to circumstances where psychosocial development appears to be under expressed or even stunted, it would see that the integration of healthy cognitive activities engenders responsive approaches in causing needed behavioural changes in the affected individuals (Piaget, 1957; Wertsch, 2008). It is often more likely that children who have or are experiencing traumatic episodes like Torture, Abuse, death of a loved one and dysfunctional or broken homes, may present with certain perceptions about that aspect of their lives and this may well metamorphose into behavioural changes that would limit psychosocial development. Studies on child therapy such as the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), project the utilization of standard techniques and activities in evaluating and redressing cognitive as well as behavioural disorders. CBT adopts treatment plans which include Case formulation sessions with

facilitators who employ mediated processes and activities such as behavioural experiments and exposure to engender cognitive restructuring (Normann et al, 190).

In recent studies carried out on the impact of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy on increasing levels of anxiety and negative thinking in children, the process of Metacognition appears suitable in assisting at-risk children in distinguishing between healthy reflective thinking and determining levels of self-awareness and involvement. Nicoline Normann observes that:

> *The significance of metacognitive beliefs and processes in the development and maintenance of anxiety has gained increased attention of empirical support in recent years. Thus, an examination of high-order metacognitions, and how these are related to primary cognitions, is a natural progression in the study of change mechanisms within CBT.*

Robert Fisher corroborates this view, acknowledging Jean Piaget's findings on children's reflection of problems as consideration for possibilities and important avenues for cognitive development. Quoting Piaget, he observes that "if the child is going to control and direct his own thinking, in the kind of way we have been considering, he must become conscious of it" (3). Thus, metacognitive development should stimulate a conceptualization of given situations in such a way that negative thoughts attached to these situations are not focused on and taken as a reflection of reality. Metacognition should create a sense of awareness about an issue or phenomenon and propel a state of preparedness and confidence rather than a feeling of helplessness. Wells (2009), cited by Normann et al inform that:

> *A main tenet of Metacognitive theory is that metacognitions cause and maintain anxiety by influencing the style of thinking. Two main domains of beliefs are central to how individuals respond to their inner thoughts and experiences. Positive beliefs refer to the usefulness of worry, e.g., that worrying makes you prepared, whereas negative beliefs refer to the dangerousness and uncontrollability of such thought processes, e.g., that worry is uncontrollable and can make you lose your mind.*

The above submission aggregates Piaget's postulations on the discourse of cognitive development in children. These postulations, built on evidence obtained from observations of children's spontaneous speech and interactions as well as behaviour during constructed problem-solving situations, reveal that response to certain situations is indicative of progress made in development. Wertsch, (2008) states that "progress through development stages for Piaget, requires awareness of, interaction with and attempts to control both objects and others in the environment. In the instance of seemingly traumatic situations, which could be aptly described as the 'object' of concern, the child should thus, be made aware of, interact with and control the object within his environment. Again cited by Wertsch (2008), Piaget on the subject of Metacognition and self-regulation avers that:

> *For the understanding of other people as well as for the understanding of the outside world, two conditions are necessary: (1) consciousness of oneself as a subject, and the ability to detach subject from object so as not to attribute to the second, the characteristic of first; (2) to cease to look upon one's own point of view as the only possible one, and to co-ordinate it with that of others.*

The role and guidance of the Teacher/facilitator, thus becomes quite evident in encouraging metacognitive awareness in children. Some scholars propose that teachers should ascertain from children, the successes and difficulties they have with certain problems. They should be encouraged to reflect on kinds of thinking that are positively engaging so as to be conscious of those processes that have either aided or hindered progress. Vygotsky expresses this position through concepts such as the Zone of proximal development which advocates that children can go beyond present levels of competence when engaged in mental activities that are collaborative in nature. Sheldon White describes this as "a magic place where minds meet, where things are not the same to all who see them, where meanings are fluid and

where one person's construal may pre-empt another's. More recently, other studies have adopted Vygotsky's school of thought as a much more intricate tool within the concept of child learning and development such that emphasis on channels like language can serve as medium for learning and thus could propel thinking and metacognitive skills.

Transformative Aspects of Art and Drama in Addressing Cognitive Development

Discussions have persisted on the interventionist aspects of Art as educative and therapeutic mediums capable of improving cognitive as well as other qualitative psychosocial activities. Some studies have indicated that art expressions such as children's drawings can be used as a projective measure to aid the interpretation of children's thoughts and feelings. Michael Bat'Or et al (2014) observes that:

> *Long before children express their thoughts and feelings into words, they can express them in drawings. Children's drawings can be used as windows into their minds in terms of their developing cognitive competence as well as their emotional experience, for example, attachment security* Bat'Or *et al* (2014).

The integration of the performative aspect of art, presents as an innovative tool in developing cognitive abilities in children. A number of concepts appear to find expression on the therapeutic components of Art. Scholars have argued that, Art; be it visual or performative possesses strong potential in causing positive psychological and behavioural change. Interventions such as the Cognitive Behavioural Art Therapy (CBAT), which combines cognitive and behavioural therapies like cognitive restructuring, breathing exercises and psycho-education with Artistic expressions like paintings and sculptures, have recorded successes in aiding persons with anxiety issues or other psychological disorders.

On a study on the integration of Art into Cognitive behavioral Therapy for anxiety disorders such as the Panic Disorder with Agoraphobia (PDA) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Francis J. Morris reports that in case 1 for PDA, "The intervention resulted in statistically significant reductions in Panic frequency and some features of Panic anxiety and agoraphobia. In case 2 for GAD, the decrease in general anxiety was marginally significant" (343). Indeed, as a necessitated improvement on the cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), the CBAT incorporates the role of Art in fostering deeper levels of focus and commitment to the behavioural restructuring process. Morris, informs that "CBT requires clients to think abstractly for a variety of tasks, including visualization and ranking exercises. These exercises may be challenging for some clients with lower verbal skills or more concrete thinking".

However, the integration of Art therapy allows for the participants to be more actively engaged in the process of their transformation, rather than merely being 'spoon fed' by the therapists. The performative aspect and quality of Art may be viewed as an equally effective intervention for Therapy and Rehabilitation. Indeed, studies in this area show that the performing Arts either in the context of Dance or Drama possess far reaching potentials in engendering psycho-social and behavioral change. The concept of Dance/movement therapy for instance, emerged around 1950 in North America as an interdisciplinary field, composed of the creative and expressive characteristics of dance as well as knowledge and methods in psychotherapy (Lee, 2002). Thus, as an Art form, Dance involves bodily movements and expressions that are capable of stimulating feelings and thoughts in an individual as well as inducing communicative expressions with the world around him.

Likewise, Drama as intervention; which is also a performative process, can be utilized in improving psychological skills in children and Adults alike. Indeed, concepts like Drama therapy have been defined as the systematic and intentional use of drama/theatre to achieve psychological change and growth. (Emunah, 1994). Scholars inform that other manifestations of Drama therapy include Psychodrama, Playback theatre, Movement drama and so on which basically acknowledges the relevance as well as interdependence of health and creativity in an approach that cuts across disciplines. Dayton cited in Butler et al, (2013) states that drama therapy allows for a creative symbolic expression of thinking, feeling and

behaviour that can lead to an enhanced creativity and spontaneity in the individual and an increased ability to perceive and take action toward desirable life choices.

The similarity of the art forms of dance and drama in the context of character modulation perhaps lies in the activity and conscious involvement of thoughts and body movements to create healthy energy where psychological development could thrive. It has been observed that movement can be used to communicate. Thus, the ability not just to understand the meaning of bodily expressions as can be espoused through drama or dance, but also to channel these art forms as therapeutic media becomes imperative in inducing positive behavioural and psychological development in dealing with children or adolescents. Therefore, even in more formal environments such as schools, teachers and facilitators may find themselves stepping into the shoes of drama-therapists and animateurs in effectively employing deft skill in group situations, where the participants are assisted to resolve problems through creative ways. This in turn creates an environment, for example, through the instrumentality of drama, where the voices, stories, bodies and reflections of the participants and the group in general, play an important role in improving teacher-participant relations and inadvertently increasing the therapeutic potential of the process.

Story Development of the Applied Theatre Project at Demonstration Secondary School, Ifite Awka

The applied theatre project was carried out by 200 level 2020/2021 session students of the department of Theatre and Film studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka in partial fulfilment of the course; Theatre in Education and Community TFS 261. The students were to pick theme through a random process as supervised by the lecturer of the course. The various themes included; Subject comprehension, Folklore Adaptation, Health & Hygiene and Moral decadence. The students selected the theme, Health and Hygiene to work with. The group, after due consultations and preliminary engagements were authorised to carry out the project at the Demonstration secondary school, Commissioners quaters, Awka with emphasis on the junior classes of JS1 and JS2. The project lasted for 5 weeks with a contact period of 90 minutes each, two times weekly.

The story development as put together by the student-facilitators revolved around sub-themes of personal hygiene among students and proper parental engagement in child upbringing. The eventual production held the 11th of March 2022 at the school premises. The play titled; *The Reward for Cleanliness* was divided into the following scenes;

Scene One: Teachers and students are gathered for the morning assembly. The principal educates the students on the importance of maintaining good personal hygiene. As she continues to address them, a visibly unkempt and shabbily dressed student saunters in amidst jeers from others students. He is reprimanded by the principal who also insists on meeting the parents of the boy. At the same instant, another female student begins to throw up and collapses. She is quickly taken to the school clinic as the assembly ends abruptly.

Scene Two: The scene opens at the school clinic where the student who collapsed is being treated. The doctor informs the principal that preliminary observations and tests indicate that the student may be suffering from a bout of cholera. The mother of the student rushes in at that point to sit by her child but after she is briefed by the principal and doctor, she goes into a fit and accuses the school of being complicit in the predicament of her child by not providing proper sanitary facilities for children in the school. This accusation is refuted by the principal who demands an apology from the parent. The scene ends in frenzy as the mother insists on carrying her child to a "proper" hospital.

Scene Three: The scene opens in one of the classrooms of the school. In an attempt to answer a question asked by a female teacher, a student becomes the object of teasing and mockery because her uniform is stained from behind. On further inquiry, the teacher discovers that the student, who is on her menstrual cycle, was making use of tissue paper rolls rather than a sanitary pad. The teacher goes ahead to educate

her class and members of the audience on the importance as well as things to do to ensure proper menstrual hygiene such as; the use of cotton sanitary pads, frequent changing of pads during such periods, taking baths regularly, using light coloured and separate undergarments for such periods and so on. As she ends her talk, another teacher pulls in a student for engaging in open defecation. This is also thoroughly condemned and is attributed to as the major cause of cases of Cholera in the school. The scene ends as the teachers mobilise the students to clean the toilets in the school to ensure that everyone has a more hygienic environment.

Scene Four: The scene opens in the principal's office. The principal and the mother of the shabbily dressed student of the first scene hold talks on how things can be done better. The mother admits that since both parents are hardly at home, it has become more difficult to supervise the boy's hygiene routines. The principal advises for a more involved role on the part of parents in complimenting efforts by the school so as to raise well rounded, well-mannered and responsible individuals for society.

Scene Five: The last scene ends as it started; at the assembly ground where the principal reiterates the importance of improved personal hygiene among students. She also invites various students to give short talks on how renewed efforts towards their hygiene have decreased episodes of infections and sickness. The different aspects and activities of personal health are outlined again and the school is eventually charged to see itself as an agent of change capable of influencing society to do better.

Cognitive Coordination and Development through the "Reward for Cleanliness" Project

Observations of the applied theatre project carried out by the students of the department of Theatre and Film studies, revealed that from the pre-production activities through the eventual production, concerted efforts were geared towards the transformative education of junior secondary school students on concepts of personal hygiene. The facilitators discussed issues ranging from simple routines such as hand washing and dental hygiene to more complex issues such as menstrual health and open defecation. Indeed, some of these issues have been known to have various communal and even religious underpinnings which have remained factors in developing countries like Nigeria. Thus, though the issues being interrogated by the student-facilitators through the applied theatre project appeared not to be seen as striking matters of concern due to cultural indifference, the participants were compelled, through the instrumentality of drama, to think through the consequence(s) of such actions or inactions as the case may be.

For instance, one of the subthemes addressing open defecation as one of the causes of Cholera outbreaks, is one that was woven into the story creation, development and rehearsal processes of the play project so as to engender critical thinking and consequently dramatic action from student-participants who may have hitherto thought of the disease as merely a terminology used to define a strange health condition. The play opens with the scene where a female student throws up and collapses on the assembly ground. While we are informed how poor toilet hygiene is the probable cause behind the diagnosis of cholera, we also eventually observe in the third scene where another student is caught defecating in the open which equally confirms this trend as a societal menace that must be checked.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to espouse on the engagement of dramatic techniques within learning processes as an interventionist medium in promoting, sustaining and even improving positive psychosocial activities among children.

Research Methodology

The blueprint or road map through which the researcher performs their research is known as the research technique. The learning process for dramatic methods among schoolchildren was investigated in this study using the qualitative method. Kumar (2019) defined research methodology as "the technique used by the researcher for conducting study" and "is basically a process used by the researchers for solution of

the problem." Singh, & Bajpai, (2007) described the method as "An attempt to look for the status of the phenomenon examined by the researcher.

Research Design

For the current research study, the researcher adopted qualitative research technique to access the learning process among the school students using dramatic techniques for improving psychological and social learning activities.

Population

Population of the current research study employed on students studying in the schools of Awka zone Nigeria.

Sample

A sample of 30 students were taken from the school and exercise was done by them by instructing them by the school principal.

Results

The principal is seen addressing her students on need to maintain good hygiene	The principal admonishes a shabbily dressed student
A female student collapses during the assembly and is later diagnosed of suffering from cholera	A class teacher seizes the opportunity to educate her young student and the class on the importance of menstrual hygiene

| Another student who has been caught defecating in the open, is admonished in class | The principal engages the mother of the poorly dressed boy on the need for better parental involvement |

Discussion

The facilitators also projected the issue of menstrual hygiene as another sub-theme within the applied theatre project. Often regarded as a conservative or even taboo subject due to the various religious and cultural connotations surrounding it, menstrual health continues to evolve as a present societal issue especially in developing countries.

A survey carried out on some African countries by Derrick Ssewanyana and Byron Kiiza Bitanihirwe (2017) reveals that a number of rural adolescent girls in South Africa are often unprepared and poorly equipped with adequate knowledge on menstrual hygiene management. In Uganda, access to menstrual absorbent materials remain a significant challenge for adolescent girls in rural areas and up to 87% of rural school girls from western Uganda still use old clothes or rags as menstrual absorbents and even these materials are not frequently changed or washed with soap and clean water. The situation is not different in the rural parts of western Kenya where according to Ssewanyana and Bitanihirwe, "One in ten

adolescent girls do not have access to sanitary pads, old clothes, mattress pieces, tissue papers or any other commonly cited menstrual absorbent.

Nigeria, with a very large rural population, diverse ethnic and cultural segmentations and a developing economy, equally has its fair share of public health challenges; menstrual health inclusive. The facilitators thus, considered this as an issue to be infused into the applied theatre project. The scene creation around the subtheme was drawn from preliminary interview sessions with the students and staff of Demonstration secondary school, Ifite, Awka where the project was held. Indeed, the rehearsal process and activities also afforded the facilitators and participants, the opportunity to share experiences and also learn about various activities that could be engaged in maintaining proper menstrual hygiene. The entire production process was a collaborative exercise with the facilitators and host school playing different roles in the course of the drama project.

Conclusion

It can be deduced therefore, that the engagement of drama possesses the potential needed to provide context and inspire solution-based thought processes among young and growing children even within educational environments. Indeed, seemingly common issues or social phenomena such as menstrual hygiene and open defecation assume a broader and more realistic area for educational discourse when interwoven with dramatic situations with the objective to necessitate desired reactions, new perspectives and mobilised action.

The effort, therefore of educators and applied theatre facilitators, should be harnessed to evoke conversations beyond the classrooms and textbooks in ensuring that young children develop the needed skill set in addressing diverse societal challenges; and that where communal or religious factors remain as prevalent factors that could impede development, better mechanisms could be adopted to promote healthier and more productive coexistence.

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