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Improvisation as a Propellant for Creativity in Children's Theatre

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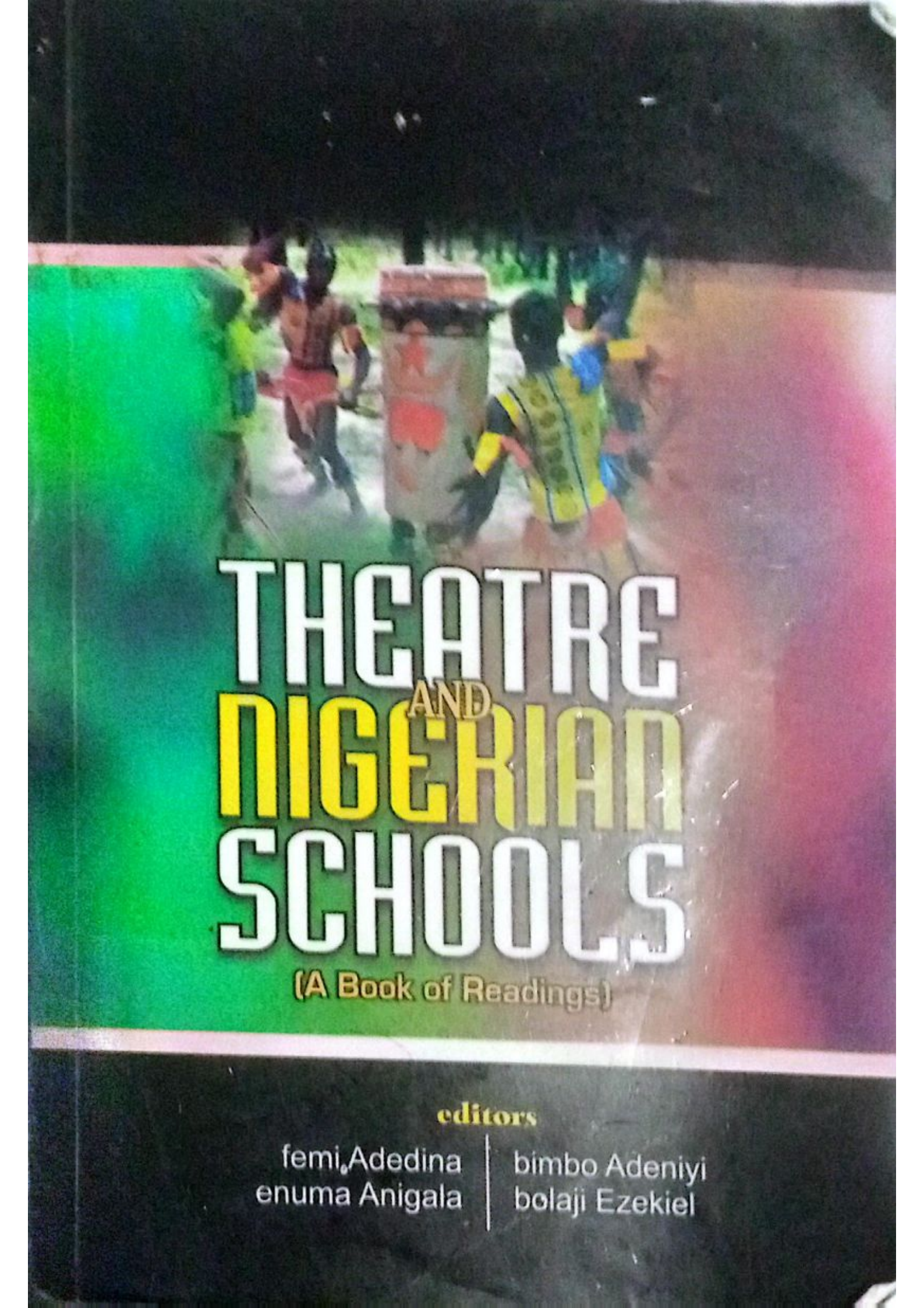


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THEATRE AND NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

(A Book of Readings)

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THEATRE AND NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

(A Book of Readings)

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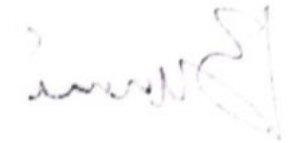
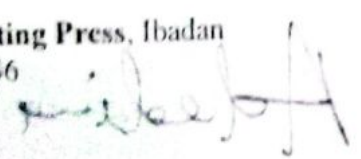
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This book is a product of so many people who contributed to make it what it is now. We express thanks to the various contributors and those who spent nights editing the materials delivered at the conference which was the precursor for this book.

We need to recognize the contribution of Efe Oronanna who did the page planning, Grace the conscientious Computer operator who keyed in all the articles and those who contributed in making the conference that produced the book a success. We give thanks to Dr. A.O.K. Noah, the former Provost of the College and Mr. Hakeem Ajoye Adeogun the incumbent Provost. They were the pillars that brought the conference to fruition and indirectly this book

To Enuma ANIGALA the friend of the Department, We cannot thank him enough for giving suggestions that made the articles the chapter they become. Lastly, we appreciate the glory and contributions of God who made this book possible.

The Editors

Preface

Nigerians complain a lot about the state of the nation's educational system. They are right in doing so. Anyone who came across Nigerian education in the 60's to early 80's will not believe the rot and decay that is Nigerian education now. The present climate of examination malpractices (this is not to say that there was no malpractices in the 70's but they were not as brazen as it is now), "sorting", constant strikes and shut outs at all levels of the educational system, the brain drain and exodus of the best and the real professionals from the teaching profession and general lack of infrastructures in the schools is like a bad dream come alive. If the above is frightening enough, the problem of inadequate funding, flip-flop pattern of Government policies and the rapid expansion of privately run schools (creating two nations of well educated and not well educated?) leaves a nightmare waiting to happen.

This multifaceted problems are what led to the first National Conference organised by the Department of Theatre Arts, Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education, Oto-Ijanikin about two years ago to look at the relationship between Theatre and Nigerian schools. The chapters in this book are the papers presented at the Conference. These are some papers that were presented then but which had been published as Journal articles in some scholarly journals. This book took a long time in coming as a result of the problems of finding funding for the book and problems involved in editing a book along with the unending official work of the Editors.

The kernel of the Conference was on how Theatre Drama could be integrated into the nation's school curriculum and therefore be used as a means of re-engineering the school system. All areas of interface between Theatre and the school system were touched at the Conference and this book serves as a good representation of what transpired at the Conference. This book will be useful for students in Colleges of Education, the Universities and those interested in Drama and Theatre in Education.

We wish you a good read and leave you with some points on how we can move this nation's education forward.

The editors

Foreword

This book of readings: Theatre and the Nigerian School System draws our attention to a kind of teaching that is yet to attain currency in our schools. This area of the school curriculum forms the fringe around the core and it's hardly considered as vigorous and worthy of celebration. It is not seen as that part of school curriculum that is validated as technical knowledge worthy of transmission and learning.

It must be appreciated however that in 1960s and 70s, this area of school activities added flavour to schooling as it provides a sense of belonging and guide to school children in Nigeria. Despite the value that drama and music added to school life then, they were seen strictly as parts of extra curriculum activities. The teachers who handled these areas of school activities were not professional practitioners. They were either English teachers or literary punks who enjoyed working with children. Until recently the need to teach drama in school was hardly discussed. The growing voices that are demanding a place for drama in the secret garden of the school curriculum is understandable.

Firstly, there is a growing army of Theatre Arts graduates from some Colleges of education and Universities that are looking for paid employment. The lack of opportunities for these graduates is however a source of concern to practitioners in colleges and universities and they see the teaching of drama in both primary and post primary schools as new openings for job opportunities to Theatre Arts graduates. Secondly, the entertainment industry is not only growing and exciting; the industry seems to offer opportunities to youths who are equipped with employable skills. The advocates of teaching drama in schools see the teaching of their specialism as helping creative youths to be self employed or well equipped to make a living from the entertainment industry.

Despite the relevance of teaching drama in Nigerian schools as a subject, the system is still a major impediment. At the primary and junior school levels, drama is taught as part of an interdisciplinary area of learning experiences. It is integrated into a sort of pot-pourri. This area of learning comprises of a lot of drama, a bit of fine art, a bit of music and cultural studies blended together to help children develop all their senses. The teaching of multifaceted skills through this area of learning would lead to the making of rounded individuals that are tomorrow humane, civil and responsible citizens needed to fix Nigeria.

The book comprises of 18 chapters and a brief highlights on each is necessary:

In Chapter 1, Professor Ayo Akinwale attempts a definition of the terms theatre and education and establishes a relationship between Theatre and Education. He sees Theatre as a complementary tool in education process, which can be used to achieve holistic development of the Nigerian child.

Chapter 2 focuses on the place of Creative Arts in education of students at all levels and the need to realize the relevance and status of drama education in Nigerian school system. The author sees attitude of parents as a major challenges to the adoption play in early child education. There is the need to rebrand the teaching of drama education to attract the attention of policymakers, school administrators and parents.

The author in chapter 3 deals with improvisation in Theatre education and reveals how it facilitates creative thinking and the development of learning skills, listening, awareness communication and healthy competitive skills. Also, a list of factors that affect the process of improvisation and the problems encountered in engaging in children theatre and the way forward were revealed in this chapter.

In chapter 4, the author makes a case for the revival and voice and speech training in our primary and secondary schools. The teachers of speech are encouraged to note the factors that help the development of effective speech performance in play production. The interference of native sounds on speech development and the role of teacher in speech training were reviewed.

In chapter 5, the author discusses the role of theatre arts in early childhood education and how drama can be used by children to explore and criticize problems that affect our society.

Also in chapter 6, the author reveals how the use of drama can increase participation in learning, awaken the need to achieve intellectual and emotional balance of children, expand the vocabulary of children and enhance language development. In chapter 7, the author discusses how the teaching of drama promotes culture.

In chapter 8, functional role of school library in the development of children creative insight, imagination and artistic awareness were revealed by the author. The author further examines the state of school libraries and recommends how functional school library can be established.

A critique of the junior school drama curriculum was undertaken by the author in Chapter 9. While it may be difficult to see drama as a school subject of tool for teaching, the author looks closely at the problems of teaching of drama and others and offers possible solutions.

Also in chapter 10, the author discusses the problems and prospects of teaching and learning drama in schools especially in River States of Nigeria. The challenges of teaching drama in schools and suggestions on how provision of infrastructure, proper training of teachers and involvement of NGOs and corporate bodies can improve the teaching of drama were the focus of the author in chapter 11. In chapter 12, the author shows concern for the relegation of the teaching of drama and theatre in schools and further made a case for the training of this specialism in primary schools.

A major problem against the inclusion of dance in the curriculum is that students do not see it as offering opportunity for a career. The author in chapter 13 also discuss the impediments that bar teachers from using dance as educational tool to facilitate teaching and learning in schools. Contributing to the debate on the use of drama as teaching tool in chapter 14 the author reveal how the use of dramatic activities in schools can help learners of English as language develops language and communication skills.

In chapter 15, the author also makes a strong case for theatre arts as a tool for language development. The use of Yoruba plays forms the focus of the authors in chapter 16 and what their future holds for language development

The authors in chapters 17, 18, and 19 see theatre arts as a veritable tool that can be used to confront the challenges of gangsterism, cultism and other social misdemeanours in schools. These authors in different forms see Theatre Arts as serving as an antidote to and a cultism, rehabilitation tool to solving youths' problems, to reinventing schools and to stemming the drift of schools.

This book of readings is recommended to teachers of Theatre Art if the passion and commitment in the soul for this specialism is to be constantly rekindled and reignited.

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PART TWO

theatre and children education

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CHAPTER THREE IMPROVISATION AS A PROPELLANT FOR CREATIVITY IN CHILDREN'S THEATRE

nkemdirim olubunmi ADEDINA

Introduction

Educational Theatre, one out of the many innovations of the Theatre in the 20th century has wound its way into many aspects of the Theatre giving room for dynamism. Educational theatre may be divided into three domains.

Children Theatre

- Secondary School Theatre
- College and University Theatre

The focus of this chapter is Children Theatre. Children Theatre is an aspect of Theatre in Education that is very specialized because of its peculiarities. As an integral part of human existence, Drama is a way of life right from infancy to adulthood. The child learns and lives through imitation of actions which he sees daily in adults. This is the stage where children are constantly open to adventures, expressions and explorations as they grow in skills, experiences and sophistication. Children Theatre is a developmental process in the child's growth which involves all aspects of life which he will later become exposed to in the nearest future such as music, painting, arts and crafts, drama, dance etc.

What is improvisation?

Hodgson and Richards (1974:2) defined Improvisation

all arts form began with improvisation.

The early narrative epics like the odyssey

and the Iliad began as improvisation, story

telling, song and dance.

A further account reveals that improvisation has a place in nomadic entertainment of Greek and Roman comedies and was in fact a salient feature of the Italian Commedia dell'Arte. Today, improvisation has found its way into a wide range of aspects of programmes for actors in business, vocational courses teachers in training and in other facets of Education. Improvisation is the spontaneous response to the unfolding of an unexpected situation and the ingenuity called to deal with the situation; both of these in order to gain insight into problems presentation (Hodgson and Richards 1974:3). Given the above definition, it can be deduced that improvisation is an act that flows from within an individual in which natural instinct plays a major role in activating the desired immediate reaction to a given situation; it is a process "making do" that is, substituting for a given situation in the absence of the original. However, this definition is not encompassing as it does not highlight some of the important features of improvisation. The key word in improvisation is "immediate reaction to an unexpected situation". It is the outcome of this reaction that snowballs into a chain of action that is not originally planned for. Eniayeju (1993:2) in his opinion says improvisation is an activity in promoting curiosity, creativity, excitement and endurance among learners. Consequently, improvisation encourages and develops certain innate abilities and tendencies in children. It is more or less like a catalyst that sets other activities in motion. In a closely related definition to Hodgson and Richards, Windapo (2000:20) says that "Improvisation can be described as spontaneous creative performance without preparation". Here Windapo places great emphasis on 'creative performance'. This therefore suggests that improvisation finds expression in a creative endeavour. Furthermore, he agrees with the 'unplanned' nature of improvisation.

It can be gathered from available facts that improvisation is natural in man and as such can be called to play whenever situation demands without any prior planning. It is a means of exploring situations (especially humans) or group activities in which we create conditions that tap personal and group imaginative experience as much as possible. This chapter shall now proceed to highlight the link between improvisation and Children Theatre.

The Role of Improvisation in Children Theatre

Improvisation plays a significant role in Children Theater. It is manifest in children's play, drama teaching, acting and scripting of plays. Most importantly it aids child development in a variety of areas like, physical,

social, emotional, personality and sensory development. Bolarin (1995:57-60) identifies and classifies the stages of child development to include:

- i) Sensory-motor Intelligence (0-2 years)
- ii) Pre-conceptual Thought (2-4 years)
- iii) Intuitive Thought (4-7 years)
- iv) Concrete Operations (7- years)
- V) Formal Operations (7 years and above)

Each of these stages has special features that makes it distinct from others. On the whole these stages serve as preparatory grounds for grooming the child to meet personal and group demands. Hence, improvisation is a vital tool in equipping the child. Onyebuenyi (2004:10) affirms that:

Improvisation develops the child's basic skills of communication through the use of mime, body and voice to increase capacity and ability.

Improvisation also promotes the following in the child

Learning: Improvisation promotes effective learning in children by developing the child's learning skills. Children are exposed to diverse activities during improvisation and these lead them to knowledge because children learn in a variety of ways.

Awareness: Through improvisation, the child develops a conscious awareness of his environment by building his understanding of the individual within the group by his sensitive observation. Specifically, it is an activity in promotion, curiosity, creativity, alertness and endurance among learners in Children Theatre. Improvisation allows greater freedom and co-ordination of body movements because children consciously put the body into imaginative situations thereby developing freedom in control.

Communication: Children are trained to be objective about nature of events and situation. Salas (1990) apart from seeing improvisation as a therapy also says that it is perceived to respond to the inmate in communication desire. Children can easily respond to a problem and give

expression to such response through their bodies, mind and so on either verbally or through questions; improvisation provides the real opportunities and awareness to draw a line between written and spoken communication.

In a similar vein, Jonathan (1990) in Onyebuanyi (2005) states that improvisation in Children's theatre is a way of creating and interpreting human messages imagined actors and language, that is stimulated and corresponds to real life actions and emotions.

Flexibility: mentally and physically, improvisation gives room for fluidity in children. This is displayed especially through the mind and body. Children become less regimental in thinking and movement and as such can easily flow in any given direction.

Competition

The hidden or innate creative tendencies in a child's thought life is exposed during improvisation. The child can fully internalize and explore his/her mental abilities at emanating original ideas through imagination. Here, the child's thought does not entail ethics or conventions rather, it is a free flow of thought. Similarly, improvisation encourages healthy competition among children due to the less formal atmosphere. Each child strives to be the best among his equals resulting in a keen but interesting avenue for competition. The following paragraphs highlight the process of improvisation in Children's Theatre

Process of Improvisation in Children's theatre

To achieve a successful improvisation with children, there is need to follow a pattern or method during the coordination of activities. However, there is no hard and fast rule procedure to achieving this because improvisation process is determined by a number of factors which include teacher/director and student/child, environment, resources and a lot more. Notwithstanding, the processes that will be discussed have been put to test and proved useful over time although they could be juggled from time to time. The processes include the following:

Space: This perhaps can be regarded as the first major step to be considered. The available space for improvisation is determined by a number of factors such as the size of group, level and depth of activities and environment bumping into one another. The space must, as a matter of necessity be roomy enough for the size of group especially when

considering how active the children are. Children have the propensity for involvement in energy sapping activities that could lead to accidents or injuries if not well supervised. This implies that the immediate environment as much as possible must be rid of dangerous items that can obstruct or injure children. Also, the environment should not be rowdy or noisy as this could lead to distractions and will not be conducive for learning.

Starting point: The very beginning of an improvisational work with children could prove a bit difficult or even confusing at times. The teacher/director is open to a variety of ideas and must decide on exactly where to fish for facts. Whatever he arrives at must enhance easy absorption by the children. A good way of doing this is by choosing from everyday events experiences that the children can easily associate with before graduation to more complex ideas. On another note, the teacher/director needs to be adequately informed and educated on the intended improvisation. He/she should gather ideas and merge them into an integrated whole. To achieve this, he/she must be focused so as not to derail or combine conflicting ideas.

Sourcing the material: This is the stage where a definite decision is taken on the theme(s) of the improvisation. In sourcing materials, there are many open channels to the teacher/director. It could be from the home school, religion, culture etc. In most cases, children are involved in this process and they have often given useful information that later crystallize into a complete whole. Also, on a regular basis, group discussion is encouraged to exchange ideas. Most of the suggestions that would be made here will always come in handy later on even though they might seem irrelevant at the beginning. Meanwhile, other ideas that do not fit into the overall picture of the improvisation will be forfeited as progress is recorded. Furthermore, the theme(s) is explored through body movement, sound, speech or a combination of all. These give expression and life to the discovered facts.

Size of group: There is no ideal or stipulated size for a group. However for easy management and coordination it is advisable that a group consist of not more than 0 20 children. The groups could further be broken down into smaller units depending on the objective and nature of improvisation. The sub groups could range from 5 10 or even less. The teacher/director is free to use his/her discretion in determining the size of each of the groups in a manner that the task at hand does not become difficult or arduous. Forthwith, effective management of the group determines the pace of

achievement recorded. The smaller the group, the more the level of participation of each member.

Session: The teacher/director should determine how far each of the periods during improvisation would go. It has been noted that children have short attention span and are easily distracted. Therefore, prolonging the sessions unnecessarily can only produce negative effects on the work. Although there is no stipulated duration, it is advisable that each session should not exceed 45 minutes 1 hour. Also the teacher/director could start slowly with 10-15 minutes sessions and then graduate. The children gradually get accustomed to the timing and will even request extra time when they finally become absorbed in the activity before the completion of the task. It is very important, however, that the work be broken down into bits or sections with varying times. This ensures achievement or attainment of the day's goal and promotes progress. There should be an allotted time for exercises especially at the very beginning of each session on daily basis. This improves the children's relaxation, concentration, flexibility (body), speech (voice) and team spirit.

Role of the Leader: the leader here is the coordinator of all activities within the various groups. He/she could be a teacher, an actor, a director or drama instructor. He/she is not an authoritarian but must be firm and decisive. He determines the direction and conditions for discovery. Most importantly, he plans and integrates the overall session. As a matter of fact, he/she becomes a part of the group and must therefore see himself/herself as one of them. This requires humility to condescend to the level of the children considering their age. This encourages a good rapport and freedom of expression to create good working atmosphere for both children and leader.

Problem of Improvisation in Children Theatre

Having fully examined the stage of improvisation it becomes pertinent to highlight some of the problems that are often encountered while working with children on an improvisational piece. Based on previous encounters with children during improvisations, the following factors have constantly proved as impediment.

Concentration: Concentration is very crucial to achieving a good improvisation sketch. Without concentration, the individual's creative ability will be distorted in an improvised sketch. This implies that

concentration is a necessity for good improvisation. When a child's power of concentration is developed it reduces tension and increases focus. Unfortunately, this same concentration often proves to be a bane of progress during improvisation. Also Thompson (1997:5) pointed out that the main problem during improvisation is that of concentration. Concentration here could be in two folds that is, on the part of the teacher and on the part of learner. Results from the inability to co-ordinate the ideas of the teacher/director diversion from the actual point of focus. The learner on the other hand faces the problem of actualizing the dream of the teacher and as such must always tailor his/her creativity alongside. The implication is that it could lead to a state of confusion in the mind of the learner thereby beclouding the issue at hand thus creating a loss of focus.

Suitable materials: Deciding on the materials to be used could also pose a problem during improvisation. This is experienced right from the take off point where a choice of 'theme' is made. The teacher is faced with the task of sourcing from the available. He must also decide how it is to be used and to what extent. Where the aforementioned is not properly done, it results in fragmented works that might not eventually form a balanced whole.

Background of the Child: first and foremost a child is born into a family and it is his first social contact with people. From childhood to adulthood a child is exposed to a variety of experiences within his cultural setting. This is why the experiences of childhood may to a great extent affect future interactions. Therefore, the child's background is very crucial in helping the child develop a balanced personality. A child that is well exposed will confidently carry out roles given him or her while a child who is not used to interacting with people will find it difficult to act during improvisation. The teacher will have to first of all understand each child and his/her experiences before good process can be made. These experiences are in form of religion, social status (of parents) exposure, cultural demands etc.

Prejudice: Drama and Theatre in general have yet to overcome the age long societal prejudice which has moved with it through the phases of development and growth. Co-teachers in schools often look down on their colleagues who are involved in drama. Thus little or no encouragement is received by the teacher in-charge. Also, there have been cases of some parents restraining their children from participating in dramatic activities even when the child is really interested. Given these situations the improvisation process becomes almost impossible to bring to reality. This

is even more expressed when school authorities or Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA) refuses to support such creative works financially or morally.

Time: this is in fact another major problem facing children improvisation. Most schools allot little or not time for creative activities in the school curriculum. Dramatic activities are slotted in during breaks or end of day's activities when students are either easily distracted or too tired to be meaningfully productive. Time is hardly enough for the teacher to effectively achieve his aim during a session. What we have is a carry over of ideas from previous sessions to another. This in turn slow down the pace of learning and achievement during improvisation.

Overcrowding: Ideally classrooms should not accommodate more than 15-20 students, but presently the reverse is the case. The explosive number of learners in a class makes it almost impossible for the teacher to manage them effectively. The improvisation sessions become hectic, demanding and energy sapping for the teacher. This leads to indiscipline, rowdiness, noise, lack of concentration, inability to discover new talents, speed, participation and relative success. Even when broken down into smaller groups the children are still too many to manage. And the teacher might well not be able to spend quality time with these groups as the law of diminishing return is bound to set in.

Suggestions on Enhancing Children Creativity Through Improvisation

So far the problems of improvisation have been extensively discussed, the next few paragraphs shall give suggestions to improve creativity through improvisation.

This paper shall proffer the PEP approach PEP is the Acronym for Preparation Experiences and Participation. This approach has been put to test and found useful in dealing with children during improvisation. This approach is teacher as well as learner oriented.

Preparation: This will be taken to be the first stage of improvisation. This stage is the sole prerogative of the teacher. It involves the planning, creation and rehearsal of improvisation. At the planning phase, he/she decides on the theme and develops a framework that will aid execution. It also involve allocation of time, space and facilities that might be required in due process. During the creation phase. The teacher is to decide on the form of the work

and whether he/she would present a finished improvisation or if the students input will be required. It is important here that great care be taken to ensure that the improvisational piece is at the level of the children involved as this will determine the extent of their participation. Subsequently the next phase is the rehearsal. Irrespective of the tight schedule and inadequate time at the teacher's disposal, he/she must make sure that there is enough rehearsal periods. It is during this period that new discoveries will be made about the participants. The teacher is responsible for moulding directing and channeling this creative abilities to the right avenue. At the same time, children should be allowed to engage in exercises before the commencement of the day's activities. This will activate their mental and physical alertness to the work at hand. Preparation is very vital and must be adequately executed.

Experience: This is the second stage of the improvisational work. Here, the experience of both the teacher and students is put to the test. They are able to draw from individual involvements in various situations before then. Also, their power of imagination and observation is put to the test. These past experiences to a large extent determine the level of enrichment of the improvisation. However, it is very important that the teacher as the leader of the group be ahead in terms of experience. His level of experience will certainly rub off on the children. This is displayed in a number of ways such as knowledge of subject matter, exposure to other relevant issues, coordination of facts, coordination of participants and standard of attainment. The previous experiences of the teacher play a significant role in determining the quality of the finished work.

Participation: This stage is also teacher-pupil oriented. Improvisation in most cases requires the involvement of the participants for new meaningful achievement. The teacher here is essentially a guide to tailoring the creativity of the children as it will benefit the work at hand. As much as possible the teacher should encourage the involvement of all the children. There have been situations where only a few of the participants who are outspoken and more expressive tend to dominate activities during rehearsals/sessions. This is often to the disadvantage of the shy and reserved children who have internalized personalities. If these two sets of students are given equal opportunities they will make valuable contributions. The reserved children if well managed could become the "think tanks" of the improvisation, especially if the children are to be contributors to the creative process. In this instance, the outspoken children

become the active participants and channels of expressing ideas. It is the sole prerogative of the teacher to discover the innate abilities of the children, explore and bring them to realization. At the end of the work each participant is elated and has a sense of fulfillment at the attainment of group's objective.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has succeeded in exploring how improvisation could aid creativity in children. Improvisation as a catalyst for spontaneity is fully expressed in children during creative works that task their imagination. Furthermore, improvisation in Children Theatre encourages communication, competition, thought, flexibility, awareness and learning in children. The stages involved in the process of improvisation we also highlighted as required space, starting point, sourcing the materials, size of group, sessions and role of the leader. Based on these, salient factors that act as impediments for improvisation were discussed as concentration, available materials, background of the child, prejudice, time and overcrowding. Finally, the PEP approach was proffered as a suggestion to enhancing creativity through improvisation in Children Theatre.

A further explanation of PEP was given as Preparation, Experience and Participation. It is believed that if this is adopted working with children on improvisation would truly develop creativity in them to the optimum.

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