

EDUCATING THE PUBLIC ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC THROUGH THE THEATRE-IN-EDUCATION APPROACH: THE AWKA EXPERIMENT

Emmanuel O. IROH

Department of Theatre and Film Studies
Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria
Email: eo.iroh@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Knowledge, which literally means having information about an issue, opinion, concept, data or facts, is power. This is because it places the individual in an advantageous position to take proactive and preventive measures. When people are informed about a phenomenon, they get prepared to tackle any eventuality. This study examines the communication of the Covid-19 pandemic with Demonstration Primary School in Awka. The study is hinged on Paulo Freire's Teaching Theory, otherwise known as Pedagogy of Freedom founded upon an awareness of self and society. Freire believes that knowledge emerges when the populace is made to understand their disadvantaged position. The study which is qualitative in nature adopted the theatre-in-education approach where performances are staged for the audience to watch, using the post-performance discussion to interpret the themes of the performance, clarify and enlighten the audience. The method significantly demystified and streamlined the Covid-19 pandemic and enlightened the participants on how to stay safe. The study recommends the use of theatrical mode to sensitize the populace on major health issues in society.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Awka, Theatre-in-education, Sensitization, Populace.

Introduction

Theatre not only educates, it informs, entertains, communicates and creates awareness through performances. Theatre uses various methods in achieving its objectives. One of such methods is theatre-in-education, a form of applied theatre. Other forms include theatre-for-development, drama-in-education, creative dramatics, and community theatre. Theatre-in-education is chiefly concerned with the use of scripted or improvised drama by actors (in most cases professional actors) in educating the populace through their performance or interpretation of school texts and curriculum. Scripts are rehearsed by actors and performed by them for public viewing, either in schools, town hall or public theatre with admission fees or on full sponsorship. Other arms of applied theatre need the collaboration and participation of the audience or community members during performances and in most cases,

admission fees are not required. Theatre-in-education is the use of theatrical and dramatic mode in education while entertaining the audience. Iroh affirms that “this is also known as edutainment. Edutainment is coined from two principal words, education and entertainment...it takes performance to the people, creates intimacy and without pressure, passes the information while educating” (82-83).

Theatre-in-education is also an alternative teaching method that uses theatre and drama to teach in informal ways. Here, the child relaxes and watches performance and conceptualizes the facts as they are being dramatized. Obadiogwu agrees that “by using drama in the classroom, we can help children explore and expand knowledge, to help them know themselves and their environment, to produce inquiring mind and develop each child to his or her full potential” (“Active Learning” 77). This is accentuated by Iroh when he submits that “what we teach and how we teach students matter a lot. It is the ‘how’ that complements the ‘what’. The ‘how’ arouses the interest which gingers concentration on ‘what’, thereby allowing learning to take place. Therefore, the use of theatre-in-education method which is the ‘how’ exposes “the benefits derivable from the use of the dramatic and ... theatre methods in teaching” (133). The use of the theatre-in-education technique in the interpretation and simplification of school texts has been acknowledged by George Rowel and Anthony Jackson where they reported on the exploits of Everyman Theatre. According to them, the Everyman Theatre which was started as an alternative repertory company designed their programme to suit the youths and students through the presentation of school syllabus play texts for the students. This programme took play texts to local schools, using the theatre-in-education method to practicalize and expose the texts to the students. The youths and students embraced the programme that was very successful because of its attractiveness and simplification of the subject matter.

In late 2019, the world experienced the corona virus pandemic – something that devastate and disrupt the way people live. Most countries were forced to shut their borders and restricted movements within their countries to prevent influx of visitors and curtail the spread of the disease. According to www.worldometer.info, the virus has infected over two hundred and seventeen million, one hundred thousand, one hundred and twenty seven persons (217,100,127), killing over four million, five hundred and thirteen thousand, two hundred and forty nine persons (4,513,249), while one hundred and ninety-four million, five thousand, five hundred and ninety (194,005,590) persons recovered from the infection. The devastating effect of the Covid-19 worldwide has necessitated the need to inform the public on the dangers and preventive measures of the deadly virus. Qiu, Rutherford, Mao and Chu acknowledge that “there have been a number of significant pandemics

recorded in human history where pandemic related crises have caused enormous negative impacts on health, economies, and even national security globally” (np. <http://hcs.pitt.edu>). Theatre, therefore, comes very handy in the propagation of the gospel on how to stay safe during and after the pandemic. The use of the theatre-in-education approach, where performance is held for the enlightenment of the populace especially school children becomes imperative.

Theoretical Context

This article is based on Paulo Freire’s Teaching Theory, also known as Pedagogy of Freedom, founded upon an awareness of self and society as encapsulated in his book titled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which aims at conscientizing the masses to realize their common problem and take decisive steps to remedy them. Freire stressed the need for literacy teaching based on the concept of conscientization through which humans, not as recipients but as knowing subjects, reach a deeper awareness of the socio-cultural reality on which their lives are built and of their ability to transform that reality. Freire believes that knowledge emerges when the populace are made to understand their disadvantaged position. This will only come when the masses are conscientized towards self-assessment to discover their disadvantaged position and do something about it. According to him, they can only react when they are made aware of the prevailing situations and circumstances around them. What this simply means is the awakening of their consciousness to understand. This is because, knowledge that literally means having information about an issue, opinion, concept, data or facts, is power as it places the individual in an advantageous position to take proactive and preventive measures. When people are informed about a phenomenon, they get prepared to tackle such eventuality. To achieve this, Freire advocates that human beings should be equipped to develop attitudes and skill to overcome challenges.

The choice of the theory and the use of the theatre-in-education approach for the study is further occasioned by the need for a change in the method of teaching the child from the teacher-centred method to a more liberalized method where the child is left to not only be a participant in the learning process but have the freedom to learn at his pace (Obadiegwu “Alternative Media” 243). This is the submission of Frances K. Stage, Jillian Kinzie, Ada B. Simmons when they agreed with Freire that his method is more than a teaching method. According to them:

Freire’s pedagogy necessitates shift towards student centered learning, including a democratic and transformative relationship between students and teacher, students and learning, and students and society. Further, Freire’s pedagogy requires challenging traditional beliefs

about what constitutes knowledge and what it means to know. Freire's pedagogy requires instructors to examine their views regarding learning, the acquisition of knowledge, and the purpose of education; transform relationship between teachers and students and reconsider curricular content. (np. www.reseachgate.net)

What the above quotation is simply saying is that there must be a shift from the traditional or teacher-centred method that inhibits the child from actively participating in the teaching/learning process and that children's interest must be taken into consideration when choosing a teaching method for them. Moreover, the method chosen must be the one that should allow the child to participate in the teaching/learning experience. Expatiating on the ideology behind the theatre of the oppressed, Veror Kachii opines that: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* use theatre as a mirror, thus when people see themselves and are able to identify with it, they become conscious of what they are to do to change the situation around them which they feel is not what they want. When people are aroused consciously, they are moved to change their world since drama in a sense does not only entertain but also sharpens cognitive ability in individuals who engage in it tenaciously (16).

The choice of the theoretical framework is, therefore, very apt because of the prevailing situation occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic that has caused a lot deaths and brought fear and uncertainty into the lives of the populace, thus necessitating for quick information dissemination about the pandemic, its causes, and means of prevention to avoid further spread and curtail infection. In passing this information, the child should have the freedom of total relaxation, uninhibited by rigid classroom rules and strangulating atmosphere to imbibe the lessons for lifelong living. The choice of theatre-in-education is wholeheartedly supported by the ideals enunciated in Freire's theory.

Historical Perspectives of Pandemic

Diseases are as old as humanity. The world has witnessed many outbreaks of pandemic that resulted in the loss of many lives. As far back as 1347, the Bubonic Plague struck Europe and the Mediterranean through 1351. According to Duana Oshiem, "victims of the bubonic plague usually suffer from high fever and swelling under the armpit or in the groin. Though the spread was curtailed, but it lasted till the 16th century" (np). The plague became less common in Europe after the 1530 (16th century). There were no worldwide outbreaks of diseases thereafter, as confirmed by Jenny Tesar when she acknowledged that:

Medical historians know of no clearly identifiable influenza epidemics until large-scale outbreaks occurred in Europe in 1510, 1557, and 1580. The 1580 outbreak also spread into Africa and Asia, making it the first known pandemic. Pandemics have occurred periodically ever since. Major pandemics took place in 1729-1730, 1732-1733, 1781-1782, 1830-1831, 1833, and 1889-1890. The last of these, called the Russian flu because it reached Europe from the east, was the first pandemic for which detailed records are available (www.microsoft.com)

Encarta Encyclopedia reports that the last great pandemic of the 19th century began in China in 1894 and spread to Africa, the Pacific Islands, Australia, and the Americas, reaching San Francisco in 1900. Tesar submits that in the 20th century, major pandemics occurred in 1918-1919, 1957-1958, 1968-1969. According to her, the 1918-1919 was the most destructive recorded pandemic in history. Tracing the origin of the 1918 pandemic, she submits that the pandemic that started at the end of World War 1 in 1918 was first experienced in Spain. Hence, the name Spanish flu. The casualties were mainly young adults of between 20-40 years. The influenza killed more than 20 million people around the world. *Encarta Encyclopedia* observes that "this number is more than twice the number of deaths that occurred during the World War 1 from 1914 to 1918." Other diseases like acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) were identified at different periods from 1970 to 2000. In 1957, the world witnessed another flu outbreak in Guzhou, Southern China known as Asian flu. Although the overall mortality was low, the spread affected about 10-35 percent of the world population. The 1968 epidemic started in Hong Kong and spread rapidly across the world. This time, the virus affected mostly children under five years and adults of between 45 and 64 years. *Encarta Encyclopedia* reports that in the 21st century, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) became the first recorded virus epidemic. It was first discovered towards the end of February 2003 in China and it spread to other countries. The mortality rate was less than 3%.

Synopsis of the Performance

It is break time in school. Children are seen playing outside in the school compound. They are called to order by the bell signifying end of the break period for them to return to their classes. Some of the students rush back into the class without washing their hands at any of the running water taps while others did. Okey and Obiageli went to the toilet to ease themselves but only Obiageli washed her hands afterwards before going back to the classroom. While in the class, Amaka, Ebele, Uche and Ikenna refused to wear

their face mask. They also refused to obey the social distancing rules and were busy whispering and discussing among themselves when suddenly Uche sneezes without covering his mouth, thus spreading the virus to his friends. Shortly Mr. Virus enters and walks around, infecting those who did not wash their hands and those crowded together. Mr. Virus embraced Amaka, Ebele, Uche and Ikenna, because they have already contracted the virus through inhaling the droplets from Uche's sneezing. Soon, the four friends started manifesting serious signs of the corona virus infection such as headache, fever and continuous sneezing. Some other members of the class had minor symptoms. Officials of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) enter and after a routine check, quarantine the infected students while non-infected students were relocated to an empty class. Thereafter, health environmental officers arrive to fumigate the classroom according to the instructions of the NCDC officials.

Analysis of the Performance

The performance took place at the school auditorium. The researcher used twenty final year students, specializing in Applied Theatre for the experiment. The play opens in a typical classroom setting as the students are attentively listening to the leader who was explaining the meaning, causes and effects of diseases, endemic and pandemic. This is followed by the sound of the bell signifying break time. The students are seen playing disregarding the social distancing instructions. Amaka, Ebele, Uche, Nma, Obiageli and Ikenna are sitting close to each other. Nma and Obiageli excuse themselves to go to the school toilet, while Ejike and Okey are playing games opposite them. Okey did not wash her hands after using the toilet as revealed in her discussion with Obigeli as follows:

Obigeli: Did you wash your hands after using the toilet?

Nma: No. My hands are clean (*opens her hands*). I don't have any need to wash my hands

Obigeli: Don't you know you can be infected and even pass the infection to any of us. Please, go and wash your hands before joining us to play. See my hands the water has not even dried

Nma: Me? Go where?

Other Girls: (*Together*) Yes, go and wash your hands.

As the bell for end of break period rings, the students are seen rushing back to the classroom for their lessons. Some stopped to wash their hands at the running water tap while others did not. Inside the classroom, some are seen eating, some drinking, picking their nose and some hugging each other. Again, Amaka, Ebele, Uche and Ikenna are sitting together in total disregard to the

social distancing order. When suddenly Ebele starts sneezing profusely, Uche complains of headache while Ikenna shivers. Nma is completely knocked down by the virus. The class is thrown into confusion as NCDC officials enter and quarantines the infected students, before an environmental officer fumigates the classroom. The themes, causes and means of prevention are embedded in the songs in the opening, middle and end of the performance. To drive home the message, they were rendered in both English and Igbo:

English

Children we are here
We are here to inform you that
Covid-19, also called corona is
in town
Wash your hands regularly
with soap and running water
Apply sanitizer
Wear your mask
Avoid crowded place
Maintain social distance

Igbo

Umuaka, anyi abiala
Anyi biara igwa unu na Covid-19,
nke ana akpo Corona, abatala na
obodo anyi
Were ncha saa aka gi miri mgbe nile
na miri na awupu awupu
Tee manu negbu nje n'aka nke
n'eku eku
Yiri ihe eji ekpuchi imi na onu
Anola ebe otutu madu no
Nye madu ibe gi ohere

Post-Production Discussion

After the production, the entire school children, teachers and the performers came together to discuss matters arising from the performance. Pertinent questions raised by the children were thrown open by the researcher who acted as a moderator, but rephrased the questions and threw them back to the children. Thus, giving the children opportunity to answer questions. Their answers were fine-tuned by their teachers and the researcher. For example, when they were asked to explain what a disease is? Chigozie, one of the children simply answered that "a disease is an illness". Although the class appreciated his effort with a clap, the answer was further elaborated as explained to them as a condition in humans, plants, or animals that results in pathological symptoms and is not the direct result of physical injury.

A similar answer was received when the students were asked to explain the difference between an epidemic and pandemic. Chioma, answered that an epidemic is a big disease. Though some children laughed at her answer but the researcher intervened, correcting the student and took time to explain the concepts more to the class. The areas covered during the discussion included explanation of the meaning of an epidemic, pandemic disease and corona

virus, symptoms of corona virus as well as measures to prevent the deadly virus and stay healthy. They were made to sing the corona song to drive home the point. Nkechi summarized the performance while Ada outlined the causes and ways of preventing the spread of corona virus. In conclusion, Ada sang the Covid-19 song and other students joined, clapping and dancing happily.

Findings and Conclusion

The *Encarta Dictionary* defines education as “the imparting and acquiring of knowledge through teaching and learning, especially at a school or similar institution; the system of educating people in a community or society; an informative experience” (np). This study adopted the conscientization method advocated by Freire in his teaching theory in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to expose the dangers of not adhering to healthy living. According to Freire, conscientization is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence”(np). The application of the theory of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which aims at educating the masses to realize their common problem and take decisive steps to remedy them to this study is worthwhile. The theory has further deepened the meaning of education to include empowering the common man to live a “self-managed life” (np). To this end, the students were exposed to the causes, effects and ways of preventing the deadly Covid-19 pandemic. That is what this study has done by taking the campaign to the children using a system or method that the students can easily relate to and gives them freedom to learn while being entertained. As well, they had the opportunity to ask questions and be guided to cheerily answer their questions during the post-production discussion. The point here is that the experiment demonstrated a jettisoning of the old traditional teaching method which is not child-centred but teacher friendly. The study that set out to sensitize the populace on the Covid-19 pandemic was carried out at the Demonstration Primary School, Awka using the theatre-in-education approach. The post-performance discussion with the children enabled the researcher to fully realize the objectives of the research, which explored and exposed the potentials of theatre-in-education approach for the education, entertainment and sensitization of the populace on the Covid-19 pandemic. The study acknowledged these potentialities and recommended the adoption of not only theatre-in-education but other forms of applied theatre for mass sensitization of the populace on issues that require attention in the society.

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