



## Students on Stage: Narratives and Dynamics of School Performance

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the multifaceted dynamics of school performances. It advocates the role of dramatic experiences particularly in developing communication skills, talent discovery, and encouraging creativity among students for self-discovery, self-expression, and self-esteem. The study examines two performances comprising drama, dance, and music in private primary schools in order to give practical insights into the transformative potential of school productions to students who took part in these avant-garde productions. It further analyzes the engagements, interfaces, and endeavors of students, trainers, and proprietors during preparation and production and reflections after production. The study also highlights tilts to the chronology of performances in the two identified schools in focus and ways to creatively maneuver without drifting from the nucleus of performances. The study's outcome sets the pace for future research directions and pedagogical practices of performance within the school system.*

**Keywords:** Creativity, School Performance, Self-discovery, Self-expression, Self-esteem

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## INTRODUCTION

School performance is an exploration of the stage where creativity takes centre stage. Most performances within the school environment are a driving force for full exploration of creativity particularly among students. It is a theatrical endeavor to uncover the hidden talents and potential of pupils with a deliberate effort to develop and nurture them for the future. "It teaches the attendee to comment with thinking and cooperation, it instills emotion of responsibility which is a must for the society life span. Additionally, it provides the kids with some talents for his/her future" (Nuku in Gunar and Guner, 2012, p. 328). From this comment school performance is a two-edged sword involving the performer and the audience, both of whom are mainly students. School performance cannot exist outside the practice of theatre and drama in education. Since the 1960s and 1970s art has found abode in education, particularly in theatrical activities, "...gives students freedom to show their natural born creativity and spontaneous and gives them a chance to think, discuss, search, observe and produce" (Guner & Gunner 2012, p. 331). The intrinsic value of school performance has increased the awareness of the potential of dramatic/theatrical performances in education. It has also been established by Abuh (2019), in his research on English language teaching, that students who have exposure to drama and theatre methods achieve significantly above their peers who are not. It is worth noting that the word 'education' as a qualifier for drama and theatre brings a twist to both terminologies. While it is a common binding force it also dictates operation parameters for each with specific goals. This study will incorporate both terms and will be used interchangeably to mean the same or as a platform for the other to fully operate

The general aim of the study is to establish the link between school performance and its ability to inspire curiosity, encourage investigation, and promote observation. Also, it is an attempt to develop empathy among students, generate new ideas, increase social awareness, develop communication skills, and enhance cooperation. To properly situate these mentioned attributes of school performance, two private schools will be examined for the experiment. Factors that will come into play for the analysis allocation, social status, economic status, religious inclination, cultural practices, gender, and identity issues.

### Conceptual Clarification of Terms

There is a need to clarify certain terms and concepts which are directly related to this study and which will be used interchangeably. These are, Drama in Education (DIE) and Theatre in Education (TIE). Efforts would be made to highlight some distinctive features, and intrinsic values of these two concepts to school performances. The concepts

of Drama in Education (DIE) and Theatre in Education (TIE) differ from the conventional meaning when applied to Education. In education, drama and theatre are viewed as teaching methods or teaching strategies for specific curricular topics. This study will incorporate both terms and will be used interchangeably as both two sides of the same coin and as a platform for the other to fully operate to establish their strong ties and symbiotic relationship, thereby making it almost impossible to dissect them as Siamese twins that are joined at the heart.

### Drama in Education (DIE)

Drama is derived from the Greek word 'drao or draun' meaning 'to do' (Abuh, 2019). Doing here simply means action thereby connecting drama with acting on stage, television, radio, and performances in other available spaces. Drama is a composition that tells an imaginative story of human action in dialogues intended to be presented on stage for the entertainment of an audience. Drama in education (DIE) is an innovation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by scholars and researchers (Brian Way, Peter Slade, Dorothy Heathcote, and Gavin Bolton) who believe in child-centred education by refining, re-evaluating and re-discovering new approaches to using drama in education. These strategies posit Drama as a teaching tool to integrate students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills, that is, thinking, teaching, and kinesthetic. DIE is a term used to describe the practice and use of drama in the classroom (teaching and learning) as a subject as well as methodology (Adedina, 2017). These types of drama activities involve extra-curricular activities in school musicals and promotional events; in drama clubs, speech training, self-expression, emotional development and confidence building (O'Toole & O'Mara, in Wee, 2009). It is a helpful tool to deliver set educational aims in the curriculum. DIE is holistic in approach to learning and expedites personality development. Learners are exposed to "crucial life skills, problem-solving skills, teaching, cooperation and collaboration" Abuh (2019, p. 35). Drama in education is 'functional literacy' because of its importance in enhancing learning and positively re-directing and re-channeling children toward a desirable learning outcome, (Kereke, 2010). The outcome or success of DIE depends mostly on teachers, not actors. Teachers serve as guides, instructors, trainers, and pilots to inspire critical thinking and problem-solving skills in children.

### Theatre in Education (TIE)

To have a good grasp of this term, the word 'Theatre' must be demystified. Theatre, also coined from another Greek word 'theatron', means a place to "see" (Gill, 2016). Theatre is an exploration of communication skills that enhances verbal and non-verbal expression of ideas. For theatre to effectively take place, four main elements are

needed. They are script (written or improvised) process (rehearsal), product (performance), and audience (students/adults). Theatre has captured people's interest for thousands of years. It talks in many forms like traditional African storytelling and drumming, shadow puppets in Indonesia, Chinese opera, simple local children's theatre and high production Broadway musical" (Skon, 2018, p.11).

TIE is the art of bringing theatre and all its elements and attributes into the classroom/school primarily to teach and entertain periodically. "Theater in Education" refers explicitly to the intention to use theatre for purposes beyond entertainment (Skon, 2018, p.3). TIE involves professional theatres, troupe companies, teams, trained actors, or educators who operate specifically in education by preparing and presenting projects for schools. Its operation transcends mere presentation of play, it covers curricular and cross-curricular topics in various subject areas and co-opts students as participants in a meaningful learning experience to achieve educational aims. Their main goal is to change knowledge and outlook and affect attitudes and behaviour. It explores problems relevant to school, students, and society and seeks solutions to them. This makes TIE assume an effective role in society and explores its potential as an art medium of education and social change. Children learn to operate; query and it gives them a broader outlook on life.

A clearer description of DIE and TIE is given by Skon (2018). "TIE is a bridge between entertainment and learning. TIE involves trained actors/educators who prepare presentations for schools or communities with a specific goal of changing knowledge, attitudes, behaviours (or all three)" (Skon, 2018, p.2) while DIE is a term used to describe the practice and use of drama in the classroom as a subject as well as a method. (Skon, 2018). Theatre, in this context, is used beyond entertainment purposes to deliver messages and as a channel for innovative intervention and is helpful to deliver set educational aims in the curriculum. The success of DIE depends mostly on teachers, not actors. Teachers are seen here as guides, instructors, and pilots to inspire critical thinking and problem-solving skills in students.

### **History of School Performance**

According to the account given by Valverde (2002), performance in schools was carried out under the auspices of Theatre in Education (TIE) in a joint project carried out by a group of actors and teachers in Coventry in 1965. "This led to the establishment of a permanent TIE unit at the Belgrade Theatre, an initiative that later spread over the country and was supported by regional

boards and local education authorities" (p. 10). This marked the beginning of school performance and its acceptability in other countries based on its prospects and capability of encompassing a wide range of enriching circumstances that would materialize in the fruitful enterprise.

School performance is not alien to Africans. In Southwestern Nigeria, among the Yoruba people, it was an offshoot of folk opera, a combination of music, mime, dance, and drama in the 1940s. These performances were often staged by professional troupes for the audience. Prominent leaders of these troupes were Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, and DuroLadipo. It is therefore not surprising that school drama derived its source from oral tradition. The University of Ibadan School of Drama was the first to host the elitist theatre. This innovation is credited to Wole Soyinka (Orisun Theatre Company), Chinua Achebe, Mabel Segun, Demas Nwoko, J.P Clark, and others. School productions became popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in missionary schools and they reflected cultural traditions and heritage through drama, music, poetry, dance, storytelling, folklore, entertainment, opera, and so on (Targba, n.d).

"One of the ways to give children the opportunity to understand their world is through the process of participatory learning which can be evident in children's theatre activities" (Okoro, 2022, p. 127). An outstanding feature of students' performance is that it is broad and covers a large scope. It goes beyond play presentation to realizing curricular or cross-curricula topics in subject areas. Student's participation in school performance will be structured and carefully planned to achieve specific aims of education. These performances are patterned activities around relevant topics to students' lives and the school curriculum. Pupils are actively involved in presentations by the group to experience problems and solutions to identified issues in the theme in focus.

### **Formation of School Troupes**

There is an increased awareness among school owners towards troupe formation in schools. This interest is not mainly for the love of drama, theatre, or the arts. It is a machinery to gain recognition and boost the image of their schools in terms of activities engaged in. It is a selling point at the beginning of school sessions to canvass or convince parents to opt for their schools above others. Also, they have identified drama and theatre as a means of teaching children about the cultures and heritage of the nation. They acknowledge its ability to enhance children's learning and achieve specific educational objectives (Agofure, 2013). These and many other benefits of drama and theatre make it a bride to be wooed by many schools. It is however disheartening that despite the attraction to DIE and TIE, school administrators and

proprietors are ill-prepared. Therefore set objectives are not fully achieved neither are the potential of DIE and TIE substantially maximized. A major cause for this is that there is an overwhelming “lack of efficient teaching guidelines and adequate funds for the school theatres” (Zagloul, 2020, pp. 109). This has affected professionalism in school troupes. Some schools employ one of their teachers to raise troupe train performers, without reference to qualification. Reliance on poorly trained personnel as drama/theatre instructors is a major challenge to theatre practice in schools. These two efforts at the practice of theatre in schools brought major challenges militating against drama and theatre in schools. Schools lack a clearly defined framework guiding the procedure of applying theatre in education into the school curriculum. This exposes students to poor or sub-theatrical activities. This is coupled with a lack of funds to provide basic and necessary facilities and major elements needed for rehearsals and performances such as space, costume, props, scenery, and so on. This deficiency in infrastructure strips the theatre of the ability to offer learning support to students.

Irrespective of these shortfalls, the nature of the treatment of problems and performances makes it imperative for schools to establish school troupes, groups, or companies beyond mere production within the sphere of the school curriculum. It involves didactic programming and pedagogic values with knowledge of the abilities of students, aims of education, methodology, and assessment procedure. The implication here is that there is a need for well-trained and qualified teachers who are arrowheads of the groups. It is this gap that specialists and teachers in training in Drama and Theatre occupy in the establishment of school troupes and are often recruited by schools that lack personnel. They, in turn, deploy their expertise to prepare performance while the proprietor funds and organizes activities. Presentations in schools commonly come up at the end of school activities to mark the end of terms or the end of the year. This is a phenomenon that Nigeria's school system, educators, and proprietors have imbibed. The groups in schools are always temporary especially as students graduate every year. Moreover, the cost of keeping a permanent repertoire of performances is not economically friendly. Therefore, most school owners opt for the one-off approach which does not give room for consistency and continuity for remarkable development of group members as would be desired.

### **Perspectives on School Performances**

Two performances in primary schools in different locations will be examined in this study. The first school is First Archangel School, Petedo, Ogun State, while the second is Sang Bleu Academy, Igbo Efon, Ajah, Lagos. Performance for the first school was intended for end-of-

session and thanksgiving activity while that of the second school was for the Christmas season performed by the arts club. Experienced NCE graduates of Theatre Arts served as trainers deployed to these schools to organise and coordinate the process of performance. The final production was dependent on the interests of school proprietors and their choices. Further analysis of the procedure for performances is stated in the preceding paragraphs.

First Archangel School, Petedo indicated interest by inviting researchers to establish a dance troupe for the school to perform at school events. The Proprietor opted for Igbo cultural dance and contemporary dance. The age range of students involved was from 7-11 years from Primary 3-6 years and they constituted members of the dance troupe. The first hurdle to cross was identifying good dancers among pupils before choreography started. The researchers were finally able to place pupils in various groups. Igbo dancers had fifteen (15) females and four (4) males while eighteen females constituted all the dancers in the contemporary dance. This gender imbalance was largely due to male, female ratio in the school population during admission, so the school had more girls than boys. The duration for preparation and rehearsal lasted the entire third term of the school session and rehearsals were consistently scheduled and held on Wednesdays and Fridays from 11 am to 12 noon for a period of three months from May to July 2023. During rehearsal sessions in classrooms and corridors, pupils were always taken through physical and mental exercises to get them ready for artistic engagements. Diverse body movements were tried out by students to determine the dance they would participate in. The school already had a set of drums, though not complete or adequate but were used mainly to provide rhythm. Students were introduced to elements of dance, body, space, and time. They were taught how they could use body movements to communicate concepts through posture, gestures, and alignments. They were introduced to levels, synchronisation, uniformity, direction, levels, plane, and focus in choreography. They were also able to get accustomed to rhythm, tempo, and timing of movements though it took a while before these elements were successfully integrated into the dance to have a successful dance performance. This could be attributed to insufficient time allotted for rehearsals and other extraneous factors that affected pupils, such as emotional instability, low self-esteem, family issues, and lack of confidence. A lot of talk sessions were engaged in to boost their morale and improve self-confidence and boldness. This eventually yielded good results as pupils greatly improved and it reflected on their performance.

The task of coordinating the group was enormous. Pupils were always excited during these sessions and sometimes tended to abuse privileges. To curb their excesses, a

classroom teacher was assigned to maintain orderliness. By the end of the first four weeks, it was obvious that there would be a need for pre-recorded music. Instead of using the drums, this was because the musical instruments available in the school were minimal and inadequate and were not producing the right sounds. Moreover, rehearsal sessions were not sufficient to train willing pupils in the art of drumming finally. The performance was held without salient facilities and technical equipment like sets, lights, and special effects, in an open space in the daytime within the school environment, thereby making it an open-air theatre just like classical Greek theatre. The school provided costumes (Abada wrappers) for Igbo dance while pupils brought their white round neck tops while pupils came with blue jeans and white round neck tops for contemporary dance. The production emphasized the content of production above spectacle. The essence of the performance was to integrate pupils into other cultures apart from theirs and also make them appreciate these cultures and see them as unique not as inferior or superior. The performance was well attended by parents, teachers, pupils from within the school, and those invited from other schools. However, the school which is in its early years of establishment, lacks facilities for standard performances but gave full support, enthusiasm, and cooperation to researchers which made the study a worthwhile experience.

The second school was Sang Bleu Academy, Igbo Efon, Ajah, Lagos. The school appointed the researcher as a drama instructor for three months specifically to establish a drama troupe that will perform during the Christmas event in the school. Rehearsal sessions covered a period of three months from October to December 2022. Rehearsals were held once a week on Wednesdays, amounting to eight (8) sessions of two hours on the school assembly ground. Exercise and games kick started each session to tune the minds and bodies of members. Twenty (20) Pupils within the age range of 7-11 years participated out of which fifteen (15) were females and five (5) were males. Ten out of the cast played major roles while the remaining ten (10) played minor roles. The title of the play was "The Game Changer". It was a mixture of drama, music, and dance. It was an improvisation script by the proprietor of the school and directed by the trainer. The play addressed the theme of National Unity and collective responsibility to build a great nation which is part of the content of Citizenship Education, a subject in the curriculum. They were introduced to basic elements of drama and theatre such as stage geography, stage terminologies, speech blockings, and movements. Sessions of rehearsals were held in open spaces like the corridors and at times when the weather was not favourable they took place in classrooms. Teachers were appointed to oversee the activities of the students while rehearsing. This was

purposely to keep them in check and well-behaved when they saw their school teachers. On the final day of the performance about fifteen (15) other private schools in the neighbourhood were invited, including parents, teachers, and pupils of the school.

### **Drifts in Students' Performances**

During a performance, the audience sees young students on stage but is not aware of the hours or rehearsals put into the preparation of the creative work. They see the final product and not the process. When students participate in performance, they are exposed to various benefits. First, students develop a sense of self and identity, and participation in school production encourages self-expression and role play which may lead to questioning one's identity. They may find it conflicting to fit into some stereotypes or expectations associated with role play and true self. School performances create a supportive and inclusive environment for students to comfortably and safely explore and express their identities.

Second, school productions provide avenues to address gender-based issues such as gender stereotyping, gender bias in casting, body shaming, sexualisation, and transgender and non-binary representation. Participation in challenging stereotypes provides inclusive opportunities for unrestricted participation and self-expression irrespective of gender identity.

Third, the school's theatrical activities present opportunities to address cultural diversity by creating enriching experiences for all students. This can be achieved in many ways:

Trainers would ensure that diverse casting decisions reflect cultural diversity to encourage students from different backgrounds to participate.

Contents of the performance would be culturally relevant through the choice of play, dance, music, etc to celebrate diverse cultural perspectives. This will also open students up to opportunities to explore other traditional narratives.

Promote respectful portrayal of diverse cultures represented in the production and their nuances.

It encourages collaboration and partnership with community members for authenticity and accuracy in the representation of other cultures.

It allows space for creative expression and cooperative endeavor and acknowledgment of the contributions of all group members.

There is room for audience engagement, involvement, and feedback to promote understanding and appreciation of other cultures.

School productions grant access to all members of the school community despite language barriers, physical disabilities, speech impediments, etc.

School productions embrace cultural diversity where students can learn to respect and appreciate different perspectives on culture and foster empathy within the school environment.

Fourth, school productions create a supportive and nurturing environment for emotional stability. There are various approaches to this, students will be given equal opportunities to participate in production irrespective of their background, experience, and exposure. Then they are given roles that will challenge them to explore emotions and encourage character development and empathy building. This method was but to play in A1 where a few students had low self-esteem arising from family problems. These productions served as motivation to encourage them to strive to overcome challenges to excel. They were also enabled to develop coping strategies and emotional resilience; students were encouraged to give peer-to-peer support networks to give emotional support to one another. They were discouraged from laughing at the mistakes of others or making fun of their shortfalls and inadequacies. Rather they were sensitized to develop empathy, build bonds, and strengthen connections within the group. Above all, there was positive reinforcement of achievements no matter the number of minutes. A sense of self-accomplishment promotes emotional stability when achievements are recognized and celebrated.

Fifth, family background has a significant impact on students' engagement in school productions. This is played out in diverse ways like, parental support, art appreciation, economic capacity, and cultural values. All these determine the depth and extent of students' involvement and participation in activities. It was discovered that students from families where art is supported were more encouraged to participate in productions while some from less privileged backgrounds were caused by religious bias, availability of costumes, and poor attendance in school due to paucity of funds. This was a major clog in attacking the goals of the research which trainers had to creatively maneuver.

School productions involve an interplay of various theatrical elements. These include auditions, casting, and rehearsals (blocking, lines, characterization, music, dance and mime). Costumes, set design, scenery, make-up and props. Technical requirements such as light, sound, publicity (ticket sales, promotion within and beyond the school) performance (culmination of all activities during rehearsals to showcase talent and dedication of

participants). There was also room for reflection and feedback after the production. This allows for student and trainer evaluation of shortfalls and achievements to improve future productions.

### **Benefits of School Performance on Students**

School productions have a lot of impact on students' development. It instills self-confidence and boosts self-esteem and boldness as they learn to perform for an audience. It improves their communication skills through line delivery, projection, articulation, gestures, and non-verbal codes. There is an emphasis on the importance of teamwork and collaboration with peers and trainers. They learn to work together to achieve a common goal, make sacrifices, reach compromise, and support one another. School productions provide opportunities for students to express creativity by discovering hidden and intrinsic abilities by exploring various artistic outlets, creating a balance for school work, rehearsals, and other time management skills. Students improve on how to prioritize tasks, imbibe the spirit of teamwork, and manage their time constructively. School performance is a pedestal for teaching resilience and perseverance when faced with challenges. Unforeseen and unplanned circumstances were well managed such as forgetting lines during performances, distractions from the audience, and interference from parents, students were encouraged to remain focused and strive to achieve collective goals despite challenges.

Involvement of students in school performance is an avenue for personal growth and development. They encounter multiple opportunities through audition, casting, rehearsals, and other artistic elements in a theatrical production. Students improve their skills and cultivate qualities like creativity, time management, conferences, teamwork, communication, and others. Also, their exposure to cultural appreciation creates a bond and sense of community in the school. Student actors in these productions benefited from these experiences which have contributed significantly to molding well-rounded personalities who are set to navigate the complexities of the world outside the stage.

### **Recommendations for Students' Performances**

The outcome of this research has brought to the fore certain aspects of school performance that need to be improved on and will be discussed fully in the preceding paragraphs.

The source for the main idea of performance affects the outcome. Before arriving at the type of performance whether dance, opera, musical, or drama, it is expedient to choose an appropriate script or idea that would be engaging and allow for inclusive and diverse casting, to

give opportunities for all students of all backgrounds to participate. School owners most times make choices without consideration for the ability of students to achieve or realize the concept within the limitations surrounding them without giving room for input from trainers. Also, there is a need for consistently engaging professional trainers for continuity not only for performances but also for workshops and talks to enlighten students on acting, directing, set design, and other aspects of Theatre production. School owners need to invest in this area to elevate the quality of production. There is also the need for flexibility to encourage students to write their scripts or collaborate on a piece tailored to their talents and interests. This would be a more rewarding experience and would showcase unique perspectives. This could also be in the form of improvisation of shorter dramatic pieces or monologues that will inspire and engage students to discover their abilities. Exploring other cultures can promote inclusivity and broaden students' perspectives. This allows them to celebrate diversity, exposure, and appreciation of other people's cultures without bias or prejudice. It opens them up and makes them receptive to vast ideas different from their experiences and this is a strong force for bonding among students.

### **Conclusion**

Exploring the dynamics and narratives of student's performances reveals a rich tapestry of expression, creativity, and collaboration. These productions create a platform for experimentation, communication, and a vibrant cultural exchange within educational settings and beyond. Through their participation, students can explore relevant themes that will prepare them for future living. The audience on the other hand experiences the emotional, social, and cultural benefits of watching a school-based performance creating a strong bond between the school and the performance. School performance has proved to be a rallying ground for the convergence of all categories of students in the school. It binds students with and without interest in theatrical production as a result of extraneous factors, like, religious inclinations, cultural inhibitions, and parental control. The theatre experience is captivating, interesting, and entertaining. It breaks all barriers and unifies students as performers, dancers, actors, and the student audience who might have chosen other classroom activities above production.

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