



PERFORMING ARTS IN THE BASIC SCHOOLS CULTURAL FESTIVALS: EDUCATING THE GHANAIAN STUDENT

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Abstract:

In the days gone by, the Ghanaian child acquired knowledge and skills in the performing arts through a direct involvement and participation in the culture in which he or she belongs. This learning process has been interrupted due to economic and social changes taking place. The school has now become the social institution to provide such learning experiences for children in the society. However, it not fulfilling this task effectively. This paper therefore re-emphasise the role of the schools cultural festivals in educating the Ghanaian basic school student in the performing arts.

Keywords: schools cultural festival, performing arts, education, basic schools, teachers, Ghana

1. Introduction

In the days gone by, the Ghanaian child acquired his or her traditional music and dance skills, knowledge and understanding through a direct involvement, participation and engagements in the society in which he or she is absorbed (Agordoh, 1994; Nketia, 1988). Through exposure and active engagements in the traditional performing arts processes, children gained experiences which allowed them to play their role whenever it became necessary to present these artistic arts during various social functions and events (Nketia, 1999). However, this learning process has been interrupted due to “*rapid social and economic changes taking place in Africa today*” (Nketia, 1999, p. 2) making a good number of children growing up in cities and towns without experiencing and learning these traditions of their own. Another major contributory factor to this phenomenon is the introduction of ‘Western’ education in Ghana which paid “*little attention to the social and cultural environment of African countries, but imposed on them an alien and abstract form of education*” (Flolu & Amuah, 2003, p. 5).

The introduction and subsequent reviews of performing arts subjects (music, dance and drama) in the basic schools as a result of major educational reforms had not

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responded much to the traditional Ghanaian style of engagements in these artistic arts (Flolu & Amuah, 2003; Amuah & Adum-Attah, 2016). An important innovation which is contributing significantly in equipping the Ghanaian child with knowledge, understanding and skills of his or her traditional performing arts practices is the introduction of the schools cultural festivals by the Ministry of Education, Ghana through the Ghana Education Service. This festival is celebrated annually and participants include basic and secondary school students. This paper re-emphasise the role of the schools cultural festivals in educating Ghanaian basic school students in the performing arts.

2. Performing Arts in Cultural Festivals

Festivals are *“occasional public events that regenerate the meaning and implications of institutions such as rulership, life rites, death rites, founder’s day, harvest, New Year, and principal deity”* (Nzewi, 2003, p. 13, 14). Nzewi (2003) stated further that *“such social occasion in the traditional society feature musical arts events that coerce mass participation”* (p. 24) through which the citizenry gain knowledge and skills in the performing arts (Nketia, 1999). Indeed, traditional festivals in Ghana are great occasions characterised by music and dance making. For example, the *“mmenson ensemble and drums feature in the Aday celebration of the Akan”* (Agordoh, 1994, p. 50) and *“during the Deer Catching Festival of the Effutus of Winneba in Ghana, an all-night vigil is kept with music on the eve of the day of the deer hunt”* (Agordoh, 1994, p. 51).

As already stated, the rapid socio-economic transformation taking place in Africa and for that matter Ghana, is denying children the opportunity to acquire indigenous performing arts experiences in the traditional society. It has therefore become the responsibility of the school as a social institution set up to ensure the formal training of the younger generation to make such knowledge and skills accessible to students (Boamajeh & Ohene-Okantah, 2000). The introduction of the schools cultural festival represent a mirror of traditional festivals that are held in the traditional society in addition to the study of the performing arts which forms part of the primary school creative arts curriculum (CRDD, 2007).

2.1 Events during Schools Cultural Festivals

According to Amuah, Adum-Attah and Arthur (2002), the aim of instituting the schools cultural festival *“is to expose pupils to the wide spectrum of music and other cultural practices found in the Ghanaian society”* (p. 157). This annual celebrations are dominantly a performing arts event. Disciplines that are performed during the occasion are choral music usually performed in local languages, traditional dance and drama, folk poetry recital, traditional drum language, and storytelling (Amuah et al., 2002). These artistic expressions derived from the performing arts are embedded in the indigenous cultural practices of the Ghanaian.

2.2 Role of the Cultural Festival in Educating Basic School Students

It has been identified that students in some basic schools do not gain formal experiences in the performing arts (Amuah & Adum-Attah, 2016; Opoku-Asare, Tachie-Menson & Ampeh, 2015). This may be due to the perception held by some basic school teachers about their lack of adequate training to teach the performing arts (Adjepong, 2018; Opoku-Asare et al., 2015). However, all basic school are supposed takes part in the annual cultural festival and are therefore compelled to prepare students to be able to present the various artistic disciplines during the festive occasion.

As students are taken through the preparation process, they are exposed to the music and dance culture of their society that may never have been known to them. It also helps them to “*understand the usage of Ghanaian indigenous music and dance*” (Amuah & Adum-Attah, 2016, p. 66). For example, during the preparation period, they will become aware that traditional Ghanaian music and dance ensembles such as *Bɔbɔbɔ* and *Kpanlogo* are performed by the youth for traditional recreational purposes, *Atsiagbeko* and *Asafo* are warrior music and dance types performed by adult males, and *Adenkum*, *Apatampa* and *Adzewa* are performed by adult females for entertainment (Amuah et al., 2011, Agordoh, 1994).

The cultural festivals help students to involve themselves practically in performing arts activities (Amuah & Adum-Attah, 2016). Teaching students how to play rhythms on a traditional drum, sing an indigenous song, recite a traditional poetry, and perform an indigenous dance or drama provides opportunities for them to acquire skills and knowledge which enable them to participate and engage actively in the societies in which they belong. Nketia’s statement which aligns with the above described benefit is:

“The importance of providing learning experiences that enable African children to acquire knowledge and understanding of the traditional music and dance of their environment and those of their neighbours is now recognised, for without this preparation, they may not be able to participate fully in the life of the communities to which they belong” (Nketia, 1999, p. 1).

Again, students’ creativity is enhanced as they are engaged in the process of preparation to take part in performing arts activities during schools cultural festivals (Amuah et al., 2002). Manford (1996) noted that the nature of the performing arts offer varied opportunities for creativity due to its broad range of activities. New words may be provided for a melody during singing, rhythmic patterns created as counter melodies during performances, and making up new movement patterns during dancing to tell a familiar story are all activities that can expand the creative abilities of students as they “*can be seen as a learning process that allows for the exploration of creative and aesthetic principles*” (Flolu, 2007, p.49) in performing arts activities.

Indeed, the activities and situations described immediately above are characterised by placing the student at the center of learning situations and build in

them a sense of courage, boldness and adventurism that can lead to each student achieving a varied output in the performing arts, contributing to the expansion of his or her knowledge and skills in these arts.

Engaging students in the performing arts provide opportunity for them to play leadership roles. According to Mankoe and Mensah (2003), a leader is any person who has “*the ability to influence individuals to work toward attaining the objectives of an organisation*” (p. 78). For example, in performing *Akan* traditional music and dance ensembles such as *Kete*, *Adowa* or *Fɔntɔmfɔm*, the master drummer, like a conductor of a choir controls the entire performance by communicating with the dancers in terms of changes in movements and rhythm, cueing in supporting drummers and other instrumentalist, and giving signal to end the performance. Such activities place on him (traditionally, Ghanaian master drummers are males) the responsibility of ensuring a successful presentation of the artistic performance and by so doing develop and accumulate skills in guiding, controlling, coordinating, supervising and directing (Mankoe & Mensah, 2003) the affairs of the ensemble in action to achieve their aim. In no doubt, students who are prepared to take up such role during artistic performances in the schools cultural festival develop such leadership qualities which enable them to play active part in the life of the school.

2.3 The Challenge

Preparing students to acquire the necessary competencies to participate in the annual schools cultural festival require teachers who possess knowledge, understanding and skills in the performing arts to be able to provide the appropriate learning experiences for learners. However, research shows that a good number of basic school teachers (teachers who teach students between the ages of 4 and 15) in Ghana perceive themselves as having inadequate training to teach the performing arts (Opoku-Asare, Tachie-Menson & Ampeh, 2015; Sarfo & Adusei, 2015) hence, avoid teaching it altogether (Boafo-Agyemang, 2010). Amuah and Adum-Attah (2016) noted that the teaching of performing arts in Ghanaian basic schools is not receiving the needed attention due to teachers’ lack of knowledge and skills to teach the subject. My experience and interactions with some basic school teachers reveal that, due to their inability to train students to perform during the annual schools cultural festival, known competent professional performing arts personnel are normally hired by the schools and the teachers to train their students to be able to participate in the festivals. This commitment comes with a cost which affects the financial situation of teachers and the schools. There is also the lack of teaching and learning materials such as traditional drums and other musical instruments for effective preparation of students (Adjepong, 2018).

2.4 The Future

It is important to acknowledge the fact that quite a number of Ghanaian basic school teachers lack adequate knowledge and skills to teach the performing arts (Opoku-Asare

et al., 2015; Adjepong, 2018) in order to devise appropriate strategies to address the challenge. The Ministry of Education should consider planning and implementation of workshops, seminars and in-service training for teachers to improve upon the teaching and learning of the performing arts in the basic schools. Such training sessions coming into fruition will equip basic school teachers with the necessary understanding, knowledge and skills that will enable them to prepare their students effectively to participate in the annual schools cultural festivals. Specialist music and dance teachers may be engaged to serve as mentors for and collaborators with basic school teachers in teaching the performing arts. This will afford teachers the opportunity to talk to experts and observe better teaching to apply same in their practice to achieve better learning outcome. Provision of adequate teaching and learning material for performing arts activities in the basic schools should be given a priority.

Putting the above given recommendations into practice will ensure effective performing arts education in the basic schools which can lead to students choosing their future careers out of these artistic expressions.

About the author

Benjamin Adjepong is a music and teacher educator in Wesley College of Education, Kumasi, Ghana. His research interests are in the area of music/performing arts education for pre-service teachers and primary school pupils.

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