

# **Children's theater as a mirror of adult's conceptions**

## **A method for the scenic representation and discursive reflection of local concepts of social and environmental relationships (or: a method for the participative study of local sociological knowledge)**

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### ***Rationale and Overview***

Based on recent experiences with theater in schools and with role play as a diagnostic tool (see **The Communication Initiative: Guide to diagnostic role play**), and taking into account experiences with integrating children into participatory approaches to development (Hart 1997) and research projects (Conrad 2004), this method proposes to allow children to present their view on the relationships between natural resources and sustainable improvements in livelihood in a scenic form – and then to allow adults in a second step to comment recordings of this scenic presentation<sup>1</sup>.

This method allows schoolchildren to present their knowledge about the world of adults in a creative way. The suitability of this approach as a *research method* is grounded in the fact that children's fantasies represent the ideas of adults to a large extent – either directly or in opposition to them. Within the creative space of a theatrical play – the scene of which is located in “a faraway time” on purpose – they can safely express their own views on current reality. Even potentially threatening conflicts can thus be represented – conflicts which neither children nor adults would be willing to talk about openly.

The second phase of this method is the commenting of the children's play by adults – who should preferably not be present during the first staging of the play to avoid intimidating influences. This commenting allows a comparison between the children's view and the view of the adults themselves. The discussion among the adults will be directed – in as subtle a manner as possible – towards the question of how “realistic” the fantasy play of the children appears in the eyes of adults – to what extent it contains facets of the reality as adults themselves see it.

It is intended that the discussion among the adults will also be recorded. Wherever appropriate these recordings will be thoroughly analysed with the same method of conversation analysis applied to other material (public discussions and proceedings of meetings) within this research project.

The method proposed here creates a forum within which different concepts of reality and different desired futures can meet in a neutral setting without immediately raising suspicions about intentions and possible consequences for concrete actions among those participating in this communication experiment. The aim of moving the discourse into an imaginary space created by the children's play is to enable participants to talk about social processes and structures (particularly with respect to the management of natural resources) which are under normal circumstances either barred from open discussion in order to avoid open conflict, or, on the contrary, are only discussed in the context of fighting for the realization of concrete interests. Moving into an imaginary space will allow to consider intentions and reasons for intentions from a certain distance, through the prism of the imaginary situation of the play and

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Rose Marie Beck for the crucial suggestion to work with children for generating role plays.

without identification with concrete persons. There is a danger, though, that identification with concrete situations and persons might take place in the course of discussing the recorded play .- and move the discourse out of the space of an imagined better future enabled by some kind of development and back into the space of real conflicts. This should be avoided by gentle moderation of the discussion about the children's play: it should be made clear that the objective is to see if the children's imagination has offered some observations or suggestions which are valid for adult discourse.

To achieve this objective, we suggest some concrete elements to guide the invention of a play by the schoolchildren, and a sequence of steps to be followed. Both will be described in the following paragraphs in more detail.

### ***Elements for the play to be developed by the schoolchildren***

As the method intends to allow for the comparison of different local situations even across cultures (Herero, Kaili, Toura), we suggest that certain elements should be present in all the plots. The list may be adapted to the local situation by addition or subtraction, depending on a careful balancing between preserving the basis of comparison on one side (by keeping the list as intact as possible), and leaving room for the creative and joyful expressivity of the children which will be necessary for the development of a play the contents of which both the children and the adults can take as more than a mere joke.

#### *The basic situation*

In a (faraway) land and a (faraway) time ...

- A poor man / woman wants to become rich
- A rich man / woman wants preserve his / her riches
- Some people want to work together to improve life in the community
- An outsider (foreigner?) wants to help these people achieve improvements with his / her own ideas

#### *Additional roles (to be filled with content by the children themselves)*

- a local leader / politician / teacher / priest / healer who either wants to contribute to the improvements or, on the contrary, does not want to be involved
- A pregnant woman (who is connected to one of the other characters)
- One or more children (who are sons / daughters to other characters in the play)
- Animals and / or plants (which either belong to other characters or are simply part of the environment)
- A source of water

#### ***The logic behind these elements***

The elements have been chosen in such a manner as to invite the inclusion of local conceptions of wealth and poverty, of management of natural resources, of cooperation between people, of relations to outsiders, and of the relationship between adults and children. This makes it likely that the play will contain what differentiates rich and poor people, and also how this is linked to differences in status and power. Giving the basic situation as one in which both rich and poor, and a local group as well as an outsider have intentions towards "improving their livelihoods" will direct the contents of the play to include local conceptions of development. Including plants, animals and a source of water into the play will direct the

contents towards also touching on how local conceptions of wealth, poverty, development and power are connected to the management of natural resources. The inclusion of children makes it more likely that local conceptions of sustainability (in the sense of handing over the present world to the following generations) will have a role in this fictitious development situation. Finally, the inclusion of an outsider will reveal something of the local conceptions about the role they accord to outsiders in the improvement of their conditions of life.

At the same time, care has been taken not to be prescriptive with respect to the actions any of the characters will take in the play and care has also been taken to leave the outcome of the situation open. Therefore, the children are free with respect to what the future will bring – whether it will be a desired future or a feared future.

It is to be expected that there will be modifications to this structural skeleton to accommodate the local realities, including the ideas of the local teacher/s and possibly drama experts /pedagogues. Collaboration with such local expertise will be desirable but not essential for the realisation of the concept presented here.

### ***Sequence of Steps to be Followed***

It is to be expected that the preparation of the play in a school will take considerable time, but also provides a welcome digression from everyday routine. At the same time this digression will possibly give the teacher an opportunity to move to other topics which are on the curriculum anyway. It therefore does not appear unrealistic to expect cooperation from the part of the teachers.

It also seems important to mention that children will first be asked to simply write a story playing in a “faraway land” and a “faraway time” without reference to a play. This will allow the children to more easily incorporate their everyday observations without thinking of how adults may react to their fantasies. The development of a play under the guidance of their teacher and / or a local drama expert will ensure that the the contents of the play will not provoke negative sanctions on the part of the adults who will later be asked to comment on the play.

*Phase 0:* This preparatory phase includes getting in touch with teachers and getting their approval and involvement for this project. Depending on the local conditions preliminary contact with school authorities might be necessary to obtain official permission to work with teachers.

*Phase 1:* Students write a story about a fictitious “development situation” on the basis of the elements mentioned. These stories will be written in the local language and collected as data for the research project.

*Phase 2:* Based on the written stories the school children develop a plot for a play under the guidance of their teacher or (preferably) someone with experience in theatre work for educational or development purposes. To what extent the play will follow a written script or contain elements of improvisation will depend on the talent and skills of the students and the teacher and / or drama expert working with them.

*Phase 3:* The play is performed at school and recorded on video, with at least the other students of the school as audience. The performance will then be discussed with the other students of the school and this discussion will also be recorded on video. This will allow a

first assessment of the extent to which the other children find their own life experiences represented in the play. Indirectly, it also allows an assessment of the extent to which the children who developed the play were able to present their own experiences in a realistic way.

*Phase 4:* The recording will be presented to an adult audience who will be asked to comment on the play. Beginning with rather open comments which might simply express the adult's view on the dramatic talents of their children, the discussion will be directed in as subtle manner as possible towards the relevance of the plot and the characters to the life experiences of the adult audience: to what extent do they discover in the play elements which remind them of situations in real life?

Depending on the local situation, this phase may contain several showings of the video to various audiences selected for individual characteristics (e.g. to allow men and women separately to comment on the play) or their organisational affiliation (e.g. a church congregation versus the membership of some local farmer's association). Depending on the reactions it might also be possible to include a second showing one year later in order to capture changes of opinion in the players as well as in the audiences.

### ***Possible Guiding questions for the adult audience***

How did you like the play?

What did you particularly like (or: dislike - if any first reactions point in this direction) about the play? And why?

Suppose you were the teacher developing the play with the students, would you suggest any changes to the children? If yes, which ones?

Do you see any similarities between the situation / the plot in the play and your own situation? If yes: What are those similarities?

If no: Why do you think the children presented such an unlikely situation and story?

If you had a chance to take over one of the roles in the play, which one would you choose – and what would you do differently from the character in the play? Why?

### ***References***

Conrad, Diane (2004): Exploring risky youth experiences: Popular theatre as a participatory, performative research method. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1) Article 2. Retrieved June 19, 2004 from [http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3\\_1/pdf/conrad.pdf](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_1/pdf/conrad.pdf)

Hart, Roger (1997): *Children's Participation – The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*. London (Earthscan Publications)

The Communication Initiative (<http://www.comminit.com/Materials/sld-5485.html>): **Guide to Diagnostic Role Play**