

Theatre as a Teaching Resource to Work on Socio-environmental Problems in Primary Education

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Abstract

The theatre as a didactic resource in the educational field has a great pedagogical value. In recent years several educational experiences have been carried out in the classrooms where theatre has been used as a teaching-learning tool. An educational tool with great potential from which to work in the classroom on socio-environmental problems. The objective of this article is to make an approach to how primary education teachers understand that theatre favours the treatment of socio-environmental problems in the classroom in a motivating and practical way. Semi-structured interviews have been carried out with teachers who have already used theatre in their classrooms. The results have been structured on the basis of three categories: motivation and values, context and subjects, and difficulties. The potential of theatre in primary school is highlighted, with time and the number of students in the groups being the main difficulties in incorporating them into the classroom.

Keywords: Theatre education, didactic resource, socio-environmental problems, teachers, primary education.

Introduction

The theatre as a didactic resource in the educational field has a great pedagogical value (Cutillas-Sánchez, 2006). Unlike in other European and Latin American countries, in Spain it has not had a great protagonist (Baldwin, 2014; De Diego, 2004). However, in recent years in Spain there are various experiences that are taking place in educational classrooms where the theatre is used as a teaching and learning tool, highlighting its usefulness to promote the teaching-learning processes. Therefore, and based on the research conducted, we can affirm that the benefits of this resource at the educational level are related to educational implications referring to both competencies and skills, as well as to the teaching-learning processes (table 1).

Table 1.

Educational implications of theatre in the classroom

<i>Protocol Referring to</i>	<i>Educational involvement</i>	<i>Authors</i>
Competencies	<i>Improves language skills</i>	Blanco-Martínez and González-Sanmamed, 2016; Cutillas-Sánchez, 2015; Erdogan, 2013; Mages, 2018; Padilla-Buele and Iñiguez-Ordóñez, 2017; Podlozny, 2000
	<i>Improves social and civic competence</i>	Cutillas-Sánchez, 2015; Padilla-Buele and Iñiguez-Ordóñez 2017
	<i>Improves competence in cultural awareness and</i>	Muszyńska, Urpí y Gałazka, 2017

<i>expression</i>	
Skills	<i>Encourages creativity</i> Blanco-Matínez and González-Sanmamed, 2016; Cutillas-Sánchez, 2015; Erdogan, 2013; Muszyńska, Urpí and Gałazka, 2017
Teaching-learning process	<i>Concept acquisition</i> Stagg and Verde, 2019; Uzunöz and Demirhan, 2017
	<i>Develops cooperation between students</i> Padilla-Buele and Iñiguez-Ordóñez, 2017
	<i>Generates participation among students</i> Bowell and Heap, 2005; Tzibazi, 2014
	<i>Improves your commitment and ability to solve problems</i> Law, Lam, Law and Tam, 2016

Source: Adaptation of Nieto (2018)

The development of some competences and abilities that put into play some teaching-learning processes in which it is necessary that the students take an active part in the theatrical activities to be carried out. These activities cannot be limited to the reading of theatrical texts, but must promote that students are part of the show to be performed (Rodríguez, 2008). The student stops being a reader and becomes an actor. It is by being an actor that the treatment of socio-environmental problems in the classroom becomes relevant, since they need to work around the action. The theatre as a teaching resource is not limited to offering theatre classes to students, but goes beyond, trying to involve students to get to build a play from the detection of socio-environmental problems in order to propose solutions. In this sense, both Nussbaum (2015) and Spolin (1990) show the interrelationship between theatre and education. An interrelation that occurs through play, improvisation and scenic language, as natural forms of expression, favouring attitudes towards the problems of our world. Since 'thinking about environmental education, linked to the theatre, is to emphasize the role of students in the perspective of understanding, apprehending and interacting with the environment in the most healthy and fraternal way possible' (Boer and Bittencourt, 2017, p. 3162).

Therefore, to work on socio-environmental issues in the classroom it is necessary to use an appropriate methodology that incorporates active learning methods that promote the development of social skills. Strategies must be put in place that favour communicative competence, the development of critical thinking, and responsibility in decision making. All this from an interdisciplinary and action-oriented approach. Because without a doubt environmental education has as one of its fundamental aims to train a critical, committed and action-oriented citizenship. Theatre for Environmental Education consists of dramatization as a means of learning knowledge, procedures, attitudes and values related to the environment. A type of theatre with great potential at an educational level. Because theatre is a key element in raising environmental awareness. A theatre that is very focused on working so that the target audience knows about our world and the problems that affect it. Also related to basic issues closely linked to everyday life such as recycling, energy consumption or water as a limited resource. And without a doubt, focused on raising awareness of the environment. Despite the increase in research being carried out on theatre as a teaching resource, much of it is focused on the Secondary Education stage, with little related to the Infant and Primary Education stages (Gil-Bartolomé, 2018; Jerez, 2004, 2005), and therefore research is needed to address these educational stages. This research carries out an approach to how primary education teachers understand that

theatre favours the treatment of socio-environmental problems in the classroom in a motivating and practical way.

Methodology

The research has been based on a qualitative methodology, carrying out a descriptive-interpretative case study (Stake, 2007). The specific objectives of the research are:

- To know the reasons that have led them to use theatre as a didactic tool to work on socio-environmental problems in the primary classrooms and the values that are favoured.
- To know the socio-environmental problems that they have tackled through theatre and in which subjects it is carried out.
- To describe the difficulties involved in using this type of teaching resources in the classroom.

Participants

The present investigation was carried out in the Autonomous Community of Andalusia, in the province of Seville. Nine primary school teachers from four different schools participated. 55.5% (n=5) were women, while 44.5% (n=4) were men. The average age of the participants was 43.5 years and the years of experience as teachers were 6.5 years. Participants were selected by purposeful sampling for convenience. It was valued that the teachers had some experience related to the use of theatre as an educational resource to work on issues related to socio-environmental problems in our world. It was also valued that they would like to participate in this study. Selecting teachers who have already worked with theatre as a teaching resource to work on socio-environmental problems in the primary classroom offers the possibility of understanding why some teachers choose to incorporate alternative teaching resources despite the difficulties involved.

Instrument

The technique used to collect information was the semi-structured and in-depth interview. It was decided to use the interview because of its usefulness in understanding the phenomena from the perspective of the participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2010). An open-ended script of questions was developed to guide the research and allow participants to openly express their own conceptions while ensuring the comprehensiveness of the responses. The interview script was divided into two blocks, a first block where the identification data was requested (age, years of teaching experience, artistic training with respect to issues related to the theatre...) and a second block oriented to the specific questions of the interviews (What value do you consider theatre as a didactic resource in Primary Education to work on socio-environmental problems? What values do you think are favoured with this type of didactic resource among the students? What difficulty do you find in the development of activities related to theatre in general, and focused on the treatment of socio-environmental problems in particular? The appointments for the interviews were made personally between the researcher and the selected participants. They were carried out in a neutral space, far from the educational centres and the university, and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes approximately. They were recorded on audio for subsequent transcription with the prior consent of the participants.

The content analysis was carried out in several phases following the premises of Corbin and Strauss (2008). First, the interviews were transcribed, from which several readings were taken, and the fragments related to the study categories were coded (table 2).

Table 2.

Categories system

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Code</i>
Motivation and values	MOTVA
Context and subjects	CONMAT
Difficulties	DIFIC

Finally, the results obtained were described and interpreted. Data processing was carried out with the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti (v. 8.4.24).

Results

The results presented in this section are of a descriptive nature and try to summarize the conceptions of the teachers participating in this study on the usefulness of theatre as a didactic resource to address socio-environmental issues in the classroom, the difficulties they encounter and the motivation for the use of this type of resource. For its presentation, illustrative fragments extracted from the interviews conducted with an anonymous code that associates it with the participant from whom it is extracted are used (example: P8 refers to an extract of the participant previously identified with interview code number 8). The information we present is organized around 3 categories which in turn are related to the specific objectives of the research: motivation, contextualization and difficulties. In the first category, 'Motivation and values', we will look at teachers' conception of the theatre experience, paying special attention to the motivations that have led them to use this teaching resource. In the second category or dimension, which has been called 'Contextualization', we will gather the opinions of teachers about the possibilities that theatre brings to work on socio-environmental problems, in which subjects from the Primary stage they have dealt with it and which values they consider are favoured through this type of educational practice. Finally, in the third category, 'Difficulties', we will look at the difficulties that teachers encounter when using theatre in the classroom.

Category 1: Motivation and values

Of the participants interviewed only two have had specific training in working with theatre in the classroom, specifically pointing to courses offered by the Teachers' Centres. The remaining seven participants say they have no specific training, but declare themselves to be great lovers of theatre and to attend activities or performances regularly. In this sense, from the answers obtained, there seems to be a personal link between the theatre and the participating subjects that may be one of the reasons for using this resource in the classroom.

In general, the teachers point out that the theatre is a very useful educational tool to work with in the Primary stage since it favours play, which is an inherent characteristic in the ages that comprise this stage, in this way units of information are extracted such as:

P3: '...working with theatre in the classroom helps students not only to learn but also to play, which makes it a more than interesting resource. Moreover, theatre makes it possible for them to be any character, at any historical moment, which

also makes imagination come into play, so much so that sometimes we get so caught up in the contents that we have to work on them that we forget how important imagination and play are’.

P7: ‘...I personally agree that theatre as an educational tool to work on at the primary education stage is ideal since, among other things, it encourages students to play through dramatization. Play is very important at these ages and in many cases, they learn through play’.

The teachers point out that working with this educational resource makes the classes more dynamic, favouring interaction between the students and the socialisation of the group. Furthermore, it promotes teamwork, imagination and work related to emotional education which is so relevant today. Furthermore, it is clear that working on socio-environmental problems also requires putting emotional education on the stage, since teachers understand that it is intimately related, as is extracted from the following information units:

P1: ‘...one of the reasons I thought that theatre was ideal for working with my students is because it encourages the development of emotional education, and I don't know if you've ever thought about it, but our relationship with the environment is very emotionally charged, so to work on social or environmental problems in the classroom is great’.

P2: ‘...the truth is that it has been very good for me so that the group can socialize and not create subgroups that sometimes don't generate a good atmosphere. With the theatre we all work with everyone because everyone has an important role to play’.

P6: ‘...it also makes the students who intervene less in class due to shyness, fear or shame gradually force themselves to expose themselves to their classmates, and I think this also makes it a good tool for breaking down those kinds of barriers’.

There are several teachers who point out that the important thing about working with theatre in the classroom is not the end, but the learning process that the students live through the experience, as P8 points out: ‘the learning process is very important, in the end what counts is the process that has been followed from the beginning until the end of the dramatization. It is not the final result that is important to me as a teacher’.

Category 2: Context and subjects

The teachers say that they have used the theatre to work mainly on socio-environmental issues close to the students. The teachers say they have worked on issues related to cultural differences, immigration, family diversity, the loss of biodiversity in urban areas, the importance of valuing water as a finite resource, respect for the environment, ecosystems and the importance of recycling.

P1: ‘...well I have worked with them on the environmental aspect which is very important today and things related to recycling as we are an Eco-School and for us it is very important that they acquire these values in their day to day. I would have liked to work on other subjects such as Climate Change, taking advantage of the movements that have taken place in recent years, but I have not known how to deal with it in the class I have...it is a second... (it refers to a second of Primary Education in which the students are between 7 and 8 years old), they are small...I don't know, maybe it is also a problem of training or focus...’.

P3: 'Last year I worked on the issue of immigration with those in the sixth form who are older and there is a lot that can be done with them as well as working on more controversial issues. This year I have a fifth and I would have liked to work on the issue of cultural diversity, but with everything that has happened with the coronavirus it has not been possible. Look, perhaps the subject of what we are experiencing is an interesting one to work on with the theatre if the next course is given normally'.

With regard to the subjects or subjects where they have worked with the theatre, all the teachers interviewed agree that any subject is good for incorporating this type of teaching tool but that they mainly see it as a very valuable resource to be used in Spanish Language, Foreign Language (English), Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Education for Citizenship. In terms of the subjects in which they have used it, they point out Natural Sciences and Social Sciences. Several teachers point out that they do not make a specific distinction between these two subjects since until the approval of the Organic Law 8/2013, of 9 December, for the improvement of educational quality (LOMCE), they were taught jointly within the subject Knowledge of the Natural, Social and Cultural Environment.

P1: '...mainly in Natural Sciences, although I have done some small things in Social Sciences, I still treat them as a single subject, even though I am now divided, for me, the two subjects are very related'.

P6: '...I think it can be used in any subject of the stage. For now, I have only used it in Natural Sciences to work on the subject of ecosystems, but I don't rule out using it in other subjects later on'.

P7: '...I like it very much to work on the subject of language and I have done a few more things related to theatre texts and authors, but I have also worked in Social Sciences on the subject of the loss of biodiversity, as in urban areas due to the scarcity of green areas there has been a loss in recent years, above all of insects and birds that are necessary for life...haven't you heard the subject of the sparrows disappearing in urban centres?'

Category 3: Difficulties

As for the difficulties that the teachers of the Primary stage indicate they have in working with the theatre as a teaching resource, several issues are highlighted, among which are: time, finding works adapted for Primary that have to do with socio-environmental content, the willingness of some students to participate, or the number of students in the class group.

With regard to time, the teachers point out that this type of activity requires time to be able to work on the selected subject in favourable conditions, which is sometimes contrary to the school calendar and the requirements that are requested of them.

P2: '...for me one of the biggest difficulties is time, this type of activity, in order to go well and achieve the objectives that are set, needs time to be able to work with the students in conditions'.

P5: 'time. Sometimes it is difficult to fit this type of activity into the programming but it is always possible to do so if you are interested'.

P4: '...when we have already decided on the subject we are going to work on and I have already looked for and found a script to start with, I like to read the script in class slowly with the children, clarifying any doubts that may arise, reaching agreements to distribute the role that each of them is going to assume...I don't

know...a lot of things that require time. It's very difficult because we always lack time for everything (he laughs)'.

Another of the issues pointed out is that there are not enough adapted plays to work on in primary school, which makes it difficult to use theatre as a resource in the classroom since, in a certain way; the teacher has to take on the task of preparing a script from which to work.

P1: '...I really don't know why there are no collections of primary school plays that I can use as a teacher. What I do is that there is an author that I like very much, her name is Jen Green, green in English, and although they are quite basic, they serve as a reference for me to make my own films. She has a lot of things, about saving water, saving energy, protecting nature, recycling..., come on, what I'm saying, a lot of environmental issues that are very good for us and that Eco-school is familiar with'.

P3: 'I end up making my own scripts to work on in class. I make micro-stories of about 5 minutes each. I separate the class into groups of 4 or 5 students and each small group performs one of the stories I have prepared for them. That's how we work. The truth is that we need more resources prepared for the teachers as this takes up a lot of time and not everyone is willing to do it'.

P5: '...another difficulty is to find theatre pieces adapted to primary school, for me they have to have a series of requirements, they have to be brief, because of the time I was talking about before and be written in simple language for children. In the end what I do is make my own scripts, although there are times when I don't know if I do it well'.

P9: '...I miss resources already prepared to work with in class. I don't know if there are any, I've looked some times and I haven't found anything, but I'm telling you, there are still some and I haven't found them'.

Finally, among the difficulties that are sometimes encountered are the willingness of some students to participate or the number of students in the class group.

P4: 'Another difficulty is that there are students who sometimes find it more difficult to participate, which is why we mentioned it earlier, because they are embarrassed, shy, but these are things that have to be worked on and changed'.

P6: 'The number of students we have in class is one of the difficulties I think we have in schools to work with theatre-type tools'.

P9: '...I have 23 students in the class and sometimes it is difficult to do this type of activity with such a large number, but we manage as best we can, I always try to get everyone to participate, even if it means creating groups for make-up, costumes, props...'

Conclusions

In accordance with the objectives formulated, as well as the results obtained, we can affirm that theatre is a didactic resource with great potential for working on socio-environmental problems in primary education classrooms. However, training continues to be one of the shortcomings observed (Jensen, 2012; Winston, 2003). Although the participating teachers have not pointed out training as one of the difficulties they encounter, it was recorded that only two people from the group interviewed had undergone any kind of training, so it is important to offer courses on theatre as a teaching tool from the Teacher Training Centres (García-Lorenzo, 2000; Mages, 2020; Sappa and Barabasch, 2020). A didactic tool through which the importance of the

teaching-learning processes is highlighted, not only the final result. This approach which puts the focus on the process and not on the final product (Göksel, 2019). is related to the methodology Drama in Education (DiE).

And it is that this didactic resource favours the dynamization of the classes, the imagination, the interaction between the students, the socialization of the group, and promotes the teamwork. It also shows the importance of working on emotional education, so relevant today. Furthermore, it is shown that working on socio-environmental problems also requires putting emotional education on the stage. As Mayer (1998, p. 219) points out, 'behaviour is guided much more by our emotions and values than by knowledge and, therefore, it is necessary not only to offer information but also to propose experiences that reconstruct the connection between man and the environment that we are trying to preserve'. An experience that can be provided through theatre. There are already studies in the field of Primary Education where theatre is used to work on scientific content or relevant socio-environmental issues that highlight the importance of the emotional component involved in bringing reality closer through theatre (Lanza, Crescimbeni, La Longa and D'Addezio, 2014; Spooner, Jensen, Tracey and Marshall, 2019; Stagg and Verde, 2019).

These are socio-environmental problems that are approached from the close context of the students, and as García-Gómez and Moreno-Fernández (2015, p. 93) point out, 'it is based on the idea of creating an integrated vision of the world's problems, in local-global interaction', this perspective being, we believe, necessary to tackle socio-environmental problems.

As far as the difficulties are concerned, several issues are highlighted, such as the time available, finding works adapted for primary school that have to do with socio-environmental contents, the willingness of some pupils to participate due to causes such as shyness or shame, or the number of pupils in the class group that is usually in a ratio of 25 children per class. Among the difficulties, the most notable is the lack of works adapted to work on specific socio-environmental problems at the primary stage, and it is necessary to create a repository for this type of resource.

We can conclude that teachers understand the potential of theatre as a didactic resource to work on socio-environmental problems in the classroom. However, they still lack training and resources. Although they are learning to work with this didactic tool in the classroom, there are still many challenges they face (Chou 2007; Sæbø, 2009; To, Chan, Lam and Tsang, 2011). Although our study has a limited sample, it would be interesting to expand it and continue to deepen aspects related to theatre in the classroom.

Notes

[1] This work is part of the teaching innovation project 'Theatre of the oppressed and design thinking: acquisition of methodological strategies to work with highly vulnerable groups' (academic year 2019/2020), coordinated from the University of Huelva by Assistant professor Camen M^a Aranzazu Cejudo-Cortés, with a budget of 1000 euros and where the author is part of the teaching and research team.

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İlköğretimde Sosyo-Çevre Sorunları Üzerinde Çalışmak İçin Bir Öğretim Kaynağı Olarak Tiyatro

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Özet

Eğitim alanında didaktik bir kaynak olarak tiyatro, büyük bir pedagojik değere sahiptir. Son yıllarda tiyatronun bir öğretme-öğrenme aracı olarak kullanıldığı sınıflarda çeşitli eğitim deneyimleri gerçekleştirilmiştir. Sınıfta sosyo-çevresel sorunlar üzerinde çalışmak için büyük potansiyele sahip bir eğitim aracı. Bu makalenin amacı, ilköğretim öğretmenlerinin tiyatronun sınıftaki sosyo-çevresel sorunların tedavisini motive edici ve pratik bir şekilde desteklediğini nasıl anladıklarına bir yaklaşım geliştirmektir. Sınıflarında halihazırda tiyatro kullanmış olan öğretmenlerle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Sonuçlar üç kategori temelinde yapılandırılmıştır: motivasyon ve değerler, bağlam ve konular ve zorluklar. İlkokulda tiyatronun potansiyeli vurgulanır, zaman ve gruptaki öğrenci sayısı onları sınıfa dahil etmedeki temel zorluklardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tiyatro eğitimi, didaktik kaynak, sosyo-çevresel sorunlar, öğretmenler, ilköğretim.