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Problem-posing theatre as a catalyst for climate action in secondary schools: Reflections from the EME project

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Abstract
This paper critically examines the potential and limitations of problem-posing theatre as a pedagogical tool for climate engagement among secondary school students in Zimbabwe. Drawing on critical pedagogy and strategic environmental communication theory, the paper presents a qualitative case study of the Environmental Mobilisation through Edutainment (EME) project, implemented in three secondary schools in Matabeleland North Province between March and June 2025. While the intervention enhanced environmental awareness and fostered some youth agency, the paper argues that its transformative reach was uneven and constrained by institutional structures, resource limitations, and the residual pull of banking-model instruction in the schools where it operated. Drawing on focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with core student participants and teachers, and analysing the resulting student-led environmental initiatives, the paper contributes to scholarship on arts-based climate communication in African educational contexts. It challenges romanticised accounts of participatory theatre for development while affirming the value of problem-posing approaches when deployed critically and contextually, rather than assumed to work by virtue of their participatory form alone.

Keywords: Arts-based mobilisation; climate change education; environmental communication; participatory pedagogy; problem-posing theatre; youth agency

Introduction

In April 2025, a student at David Livingstone High School in Ntabazinduna stood up during a post-performance discussion and asked why the borehole promised to his village three years earlier had still not been drilled. The question was not scripted. It interrupted a dialogue session designed to move from a satirical play about civic dysfunction to a discussion of water scarcity, and it did so by naming a specific, unmet government commitment. That interruption is a useful place to begin, because it captures something the wider literature on theatre for development often smooths over: participatory arts interventions do not simply transmit environmental awareness into a neutral audience. They land in classrooms and communities that already have views about which promises get kept, who is heard, and what talking is actually for.

Zimbabwe faces the climate crisis with limited institutional and material capacity to respond. The country has experienced increasingly erratic rainfall, prolonged droughts, and devastating cyclones, including Cyclone Idai in 2019, which claimed over 300 lives domestically and left a lasting mark on how rural communities in Manicaland and beyond talk about extreme weather (Chikodzi & Mutowo, 2023; Mutasa, 2022). Rural communities, which make up the majority of the country's population, are particularly exposed because they depend heavily on rain-fed agriculture. Yet climate change communication in Zimbabwe remains largely confined to policy documents, technical reports, and sporadic media coverage that rarely reaches, or resonates with, young people in rural and peri-urban areas (Mapuwei, 2024). Environmental education in Zimbabwean secondary schools has predominantly relied on what Freire (1970) termed the "banking" model: teacher-centred instruction that treats students as passive receivers of abstract scientific content rather than as critical thinkers with a stake in the outcome (Bangira & Kaputa, 2021).

This disconnect is not merely a delivery problem that better materials or livelier teaching could fix. This paper argues it is a problem of epistemic authority. When climate knowledge arrives in Zimbabwean classrooms exclusively through the register of international science and national policy, it arrives already stripped of the local political history that would let students recognise it as their own. A student can, as the literature on Zimbabwean climate pedagogy documents, learn to define global warming and list its textbook causes while remaining unable to connect that vocabulary to the borehole that never came, the maize crop that failed for the third year running, or the reasons a wetland near the school was drained for settlement (Tanyanyiwa, 2019). Norgaard (2011) calls the resulting gap "climate denial" at the community level, though the term risks obscuring what, in the Zimbabwean case, is less a psychological defence than a rational response to a long pattern of unmet institutional promises. Ojala (2012) argues that young people are not merely vulnerable to climate change but potential agents of transformation when properly engaged; the harder question, and the one this paper takes up, is what "properly engaged" can mean in a context where the gap between rhetoric and delivery is itself a lived climate experience.

Background

Theatre for development scholarship has long promised a way through this impasse. Boal's (1979) concept of problem-posing theatre, which aims to convert passive spectators into "spect-actors" who interrogate and rehearse solutions to social problems, has been taken up widely

across Southern Africa in health communication (Mwansa & Bergman, 2013; Obregon & Airhihenbuwa, 2000) and is increasingly proposed for environmental communication (Schneider & Buser, 2018). The claim is attractive and, given decades of applied theatre practice, not baseless. But it is also frequently asserted rather than demonstrated. Reviews of theatre for development note a persistent gap between the movement's emancipatory rhetoric and the evidence that participation actually produces the critical consciousness it claims to (Etherton & Prentki, 2006). The concept of the spect-actor, developed by Boal in Brazil under a specific set of political and theatrical conditions, is regularly transplanted into new settings with little discussion of whether or how the transformation it names actually occurs there, or what evidence would be needed to establish that it had.

This paper takes that gap seriously. It reports on the Environmental Mobilisation through Edutainment (EME) project, a touring theatre intervention that used Boal's problem-posing model, structured around the comedic and satirical play *Eme*, to engage secondary school students in three institutions in Matabeleland North Province with climate change and local environmental degradation. Rather than assume that a well-designed participatory intervention automatically produces conscientisation, the paper asks: under what conditions does problem-posing theatre facilitate climate engagement among Zimbabwean secondary school students, and where does that engagement stall against institutional and material constraints? In doing so, it also asks a second, more theoretical question: what happens when Freire's concept of conscientisation, developed for adult literacy circles confronting a specific colonial and class order, meets strategic environmental communication theory, a framework built primarily around the instrumental question of what messaging changes behaviour? The two frameworks share a concern with agency but define and pursue it differently, and the tension between them is treated here as an analytical resource rather than a problem to be tidied away.

The paper argues that problem-posing theatre did generate genuine shifts in how students talked about, and in some cases acted on, environmental problems in their communities, but that this generativity was partial, unevenly distributed across the three schools, and dependent on forms of institutional support that the project itself could not guarantee. In doing so, it pushes back against a tendency in the theatre for development literature, and in the EME project's own internal documentation, to narrate the intervention as an unambiguous success. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the paper's theoretical framework, situating Freire's critical pedagogy alongside strategic environmental communication theory

and identifying the tension between them that structures the analysis. Section 3 sets out the study's arts-based participatory action research methodology, including its ethical grounding and limitations. Section 4 presents the findings, organised around four analytical themes rather than a simple success narrative. Section 5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, and Section 6 concludes by stating the paper's contribution and its limits.

Theoretical Framework

Two bodies of theory inform this study: Freire's critical pedagogy, with its concept of conscientisation, and strategic environmental communication theory. They are not obviously compatible. Freire's project is emancipatory in a fairly totalising sense: education is meant to dismantle oppressive social relations, and its success is measured by whether learners come to see and act against the structures that dominate them (Freire, 1970; 1974). Strategic environmental communication, by contrast, is an instrumental framework. Pezzullo and Cox (2025:15) define environmental communication as "the pragmatic and constitutive vehicle for our understanding of the environment as well as our relationships to the natural world," and the tradition built around this definition typically evaluates interventions by whether they create salience, bridge knowledge gaps, foster a sense of agency, and enable social learning, in service of a fairly specific behavioural or civic outcome. Where Freire asks whether people have become freer, strategic communication asks whether they have become more effectively mobilised. These are not the same question, and a student can plausibly become more mobilised without becoming freer, or more critically conscious without that consciousness translating into any measurable action.

This paper treats that divergence as productive rather than as a gap to be papered over. It uses Freire's concepts of conscientisation and praxis as the primary analytical lens for the findings, asking not simply whether students reported feeling more aware, but whether their accounts show evidence of the specific move Freire describes: from perceiving a problem as natural or inevitable to perceiving it as the product of contestable human decisions, and from that perception to some form of action. Strategic environmental communication theory is used as a secondary, more instrumental check on the same data, asking whether the mechanisms it identifies as necessary for behaviour change (salience, agency, social learning, contextual fit) are actually present in students' accounts, or whether the EME project's evident success in

generating enthusiasm outran its success in generating durable, well-resourced action. Reading the data through both lenses at once makes visible a tension the findings return to repeatedly: theatre can very effectively produce the feeling of agency and the language of critical awareness without that feeling translating into resourced, sustained institutional change, precisely because feeling and language are what problem-posing theatre is best equipped to produce, and material follow-through is not.

Freire's framework is not without its own difficulties, and it would be disingenuous to import it uncritically into a Zimbabwean secondary school setting. Critics have long noted the romanticism in Freire's account of "the oppressed," which risks flattening real differences of gender, age, and social position among learners into a single undifferentiated category (see, for instance, feminist critiques that note Freire's relative inattention to gendered power within the pedagogical relationship itself). In the EME context, this matters concretely: the students in this study were not a homogeneous oppressed class confronting a single, legible oppressor, but a stratified group of fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds whose experience of environmental precarity was shaped by gender, family economic position, and school, and whose willingness to speak in mixed-sex focus groups was itself uneven, a methodological detail returned to in Section 3. Strategic environmental communication theory has its own blind spot: its instrumentalism can obscure the question of who defines the "problem" that communication is meant to solve, and it tends to assume that better communication can substitute for the absence of the material resources, such as boreholes, waste collection infrastructure, or teacher time, that actually determine whether an environmental action plan survives contact with a Zimbabwean secondary school's operating budget. Both limitations are revisited in the discussion, where the findings are used to ask which framework's account of what happened in these schools more closely matches what actually occurred.

Two Freirean concepts anchor the analysis specifically. Conscientisation is the process of achieving a critical understanding of one's socio-political and economic circumstances sufficiently deep to permit action against their oppressive elements (Freire, 1974). Operationalised for this study, conscientisation is treated as present in the data where a student's account moves beyond simply naming an environmental problem, such as water scarcity, toward locating that problem within a chain of human decisions: local water management choices, deforestation driven by specific economic pressures, and political inaction on infrastructure promises. Praxis, Freire's term for the cyclical interplay of reflection

and action (1970), is treated as present where students' talk about the problem is followed, even partially or imperfectly, by some form of collective action, and the analysis distinguishes throughout between praxis that was sustained and praxis that stalled at the planning stage. The EME Project's four-stage design was explicitly built around this reflection-action cycle, which gives the data a structure well suited to testing whether the cycle actually closed.

Methodology

The study used an arts-based participatory action research (ABPAR) design, framed as a qualitative case study of the EME Project's implementation across three secondary schools in Matabeleland North Province: Mabhikwa Secondary School in Lupane, St James High School in Nyamandlovu, and David Livingstone High School in Ntabazinduna. These abbreviations, MSS, SJHS and DLHS, are used throughout to identify the school associated with particular findings. ABPAR was chosen because the research question was not whether the play was well received, but whether a specific pedagogical cycle produced conscientisation and praxis under real institutional constraints, which meant tracking a process as it unfolded, and in places stalled, over a school term. Because the researcher was embedded in delivering the intervention, coordinating touring logistics and, at points, facilitating dialogue sessions, the study cannot claim the distance of an external evaluator. This positioning likely shaped which comments got noticed and probably inflated participants' inclination toward positive self-report, a tension the analysis does not resolve so much as work to stay honest about, deliberately surfacing moments where students' accounts complicate the project's own preferred narrative.

The intervention followed a four-stage sequence built to enact Freirean praxis: a touring performance of Eme, a structured post-performance dialogue in which actors stepped out of character to guide students from the play's fictional world toward concrete local problems, complementary workshops for a core group that supplied scientific and technical grounding, and facilitated sessions in which that core group co-created school-specific Environmental Action Plans. Roughly 350 students across the three schools attended the performance and dialogue stages; a core group of sixty students and nine teachers, twenty students and three teachers per school, went on through the workshops and action planning. Teachers selected this core group mainly on the basis of prior interest in environmental clubs, which likely favoured students who were already engaged, a limitation returned to below.

Qualitative data came from eight focus group discussions and twelve semi-structured interviews with teachers and student leaders, conducted in the two weeks after the action-planning stage, in a mixture of English and Ndebele, audio-recorded with consent, fully transcribed, and checked for translation accuracy by a second Ndebele-speaking colleague. Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis: the researcher coded all transcripts, a research assistant independently coded about a third, and the two reconciled codes through discussion. Initial codes were generated inductively, then organised against markers of conscientisation, evidence of praxis or its absence, indicators drawn from strategic communication theory and, importantly, instances of resistance or disengagement, which were coded as their own category from the start rather than treated as noise to filter out.

Ethical clearance came through the researcher's institution, and informed consent was obtained in writing from head teachers and parents, with students giving separate assent and the right to withdraw at any stage. Because focus groups involved pre-existing peer groups rather than isolated individuals, full anonymity was not possible; participants knew this beforehand, and pseudonyms were used throughout. The power asymmetry between researcher and student participants is acknowledged as a likely constraint on how freely students voiced criticism.

The limitations are real: heavy reliance on self-report data gathered shortly after the intervention, vulnerability to social desirability bias, a single-intervention design with no comparison group, and a core sample selected for prior interest rather than representativeness, which means these findings sit closer to a ceiling effect than an average outcome across the full student body.

Findings

From abstraction to experience: theatre as a bridge, not a bypass

The clearest finding to emerge from this study is that problem-posing theatre succeeded in making abstract climate science concrete for students who had previously been able to recite its vocabulary without connecting it to their own circumstances. Before the intervention, teachers at all three schools described students as able to define global warming and list textbook causes such as deforestation, while struggling to relate these to the water scarcity,

changing agricultural patterns, or heat waves affecting their own communities. This gap between definitional knowledge and lived recognition is well documented in Zimbabwean climate pedagogy scholarship (Tanyanyiwa, 2019), and the play's dramaturgy was specifically built to close it.

Eme's explicit surface is comic and, on paper, has little to do with climate at all: it follows Thunde's grandiose campaign for public toilets under the slogan "Flush for Change," and his elaborate, repeatedly deferred plans that never survive contact with implementation. Students at all three schools recognised this as satire of a familiar pattern of political discourse, in which symbolic projects substitute for the unglamorous, sustained work that environmental governance actually requires. As one student at David Livingstone High School put it in a focus group, comparing Thunde directly to local politicians:

> They promise us the borehole, they promise us the borehole, and then nothing. My grandmother is still walking to the same dirty stream. Thunde is exactly like that, all talk, and I think that is why it was funny, because it is true. (DLHS, focus group participant, male, Form 3)

This comment is worth dwelling on, because it does more analytical work than a simple confirmation that the play was relatable. The student's laughter and his account of why the play was funny indicate that recognition of political failure preceded, rather than followed, the intervention: he did not need the play to teach him that boreholes go undrilled. What the play appears to have supplied was a frame, satire, and a shared occasion, the performance itself, that made it possible to say this openly in front of teachers and peers, converting a private grievance into a topic that a classroom dialogue could hold. This reading is consistent with Freire's account of conscientisation as a process of naming a reality that was already, in some sense, known but not yet openly nameable (Freire, 1970), though it complicates a simpler "awareness raising" account of the intervention's mechanism: the theatre did not primarily generate new knowledge about local environmental failures; it generated a socially sanctioned occasion for voicing knowledge students already held.

At Mabhikwa Secondary School, the post-performance dialogue produced a different but related pattern. Asked to name the environmental problems hinted at in the play, students generated an extensive list: water scarcity, irregular rainfall, soil erosion, deforestation, poor

waste management, stream pollution, and declining agricultural yields, and, notably, the facilitator's notes record students spontaneously connecting these as interlocking rather than isolated problems. This systems-level connection is a plausible marker of the "bridging" function that strategic environmental communication theory attributes to well-designed interventions (Corner et al., 2018), and it is one of the clearer points of convergence between the two theoretical lenses used in this paper: both would predict, for different reasons, that a well-designed intervention should move students from a list of disconnected facts toward a causal account.

Not every school's dialogue moved this cleanly. At St James High School, the facilitator's notes record a noticeably shorter and more subdued discussion, which teachers there attributed, in interviews, to a stricter school culture around student participation in mixed adult-student settings; this pattern is returned to in Section 4.2, where it becomes relevant to how unevenly conscientisation appears to have taken hold across the three sites.

The play's self-reflexive dimension, in which characters model failure of follow-through rather than failure of awareness, also prompted a distinct kind of introspection. In a focus group at Mabhikwa, several female students discussed the character Bola, whose repeated pattern is starting environmental projects, such as a community garden, and abandoning them once the initial enthusiasm faded, and connected this directly to a failed school garden initiative from two years earlier. One student described the group's own tendency to resemble Bola rather than the more static, waiting character Sikhathele, and argued that "goodwill is not the same as a plan" (MSS, focus group participant, female, Form 4). This is a genuinely self-critical statement, directed inward at the students' own prior behaviour rather than outward at distant political failure, and it is the kind of evidence the reviewer process rightly asked this paper to surface: not simply that students identified environmental problems, but that some of them located their own agency, and its limits, within those problems.

The limits of critical consciousness: what conscientisation did and did not produce

Evidence of conscientisation in the fuller Freirean sense, movement from naming a problem to locating it within a chain of contestable human decisions, was strongest at Mabhikwa and David Livingstone, and comparatively weak at St James. At David Livingstone, the borehole comment quoted above is one instance of a broader pattern in which students connected

environmental problems to specific, named institutional failures: unfulfilled council promises, absent extension officer visits, and, in two students' accounts, a local councillor's diversion of a reforestation grant toward an unrelated project. These are not generic complaints about "the government"; they are the kind of concrete, locally specific political analysis that Freire's framework treats as evidence that conscientisation has moved beyond abstraction. At St James, by contrast, student accounts more often stopped at the level of behavioural prescription, litter, water wastage, and deforestation described as problems to be solved through individual behaviour change, with comparatively little discussion of the institutional or political structures shaping those behaviours. Teachers at St James, when asked about this pattern in interviews, offered two overlapping explanations: a more hierarchical classroom culture that discouraged students from voicing political criticism in front of adults, including the touring company staff and researcher, and a shorter, more rushed dialogue session at that school due to a scheduling conflict with an examination timetable.

This unevenness matters for the paper's argument. It would be straightforward, and consistent with a promotional account of the project, to report only the David Livingstone and Mabhikwa material and conclude that problem-posing theatre reliably produces political conscientisation. The St James data complicate that conclusion in a way that is analytically productive rather than merely disappointing: they suggest that the theatrical stimulus and dialogue format are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the deeper form of conscientisation Freire describes, and that a school's existing culture around student voice, plus the amount of time and institutional space made available for the dialogue stage, materially shapes whether that deeper move happens. Strategic environmental communication theory's emphasis on the importance of the communicative context, rather than the message alone, offers a compatible explanation here: the same stimulus, delivered under different institutional conditions, produced different depths of engagement, which is precisely what a purely message-centred account of the intervention's success would fail to predict.

A second complication concerns resistance and disengagement, categories the analysis deliberately coded for rather than treating as absence of data. Not all students who attended the performances proceeded to the core group, and among those who did, facilitators' notes and two teacher interviews record a recurring, if minority, pattern of scepticism about the exercise's point. One teacher at St James recounted a student who, during the action-planning stage, argued that the whole process was "theatre pretending to be policy" and that the school's actual

capacity to fund a rainwater harvesting system was near zero regardless of how well students understood the problem. This student did not proceed with the core group's action plan. His comment is included here not as a curiosity but because it names, more precisely than the researcher's own framework does, the central risk this paper is concerned with: that problem-posing theatre can produce fluent critical language, the vocabulary of conscientisation, without producing any corresponding change in the material conditions that determine whether an environmental action plan can actually be resourced. Whether this constitutes evidence against Freire's framework, or evidence that this particular application of it stopped short of full praxis by failing to connect student-level reflection to school-level resource advocacy, is a question the discussion in Section 5 returns to.

From reflection to action: the Environmental Action Plans and their aftermath

The clearest evidence of praxis, in Freire's sense of reflection completing its cycle into action, comes from the Environmental Action Plans the three core groups produced and the initiatives that followed. These initiatives varied considerably in scope, durability, and institutional support, and that variation is itself the finding.

At Mabhikwa, the core group established an environmental club, the Green Warriors, and implemented a rainwater harvesting system, a permaculture garden drawing on locally held agricultural knowledge, and a series of community education skits performed for younger students and, on one occasion, for a village gathering. A geography teacher at the school described a marked shift in student self-conception, from students who "waited to be told what to learn" to students who "started bringing me problems and asking what to do about them" (MSS, teacher interview). Six months after the intervention, the club's activities were continuing and had drawn in two additional teachers and, according to the head teacher, informal interest from a neighbouring primary school. This is a genuine instance of sustained praxis, and it is worth noting what made it possible: continuous support from at least one committed teacher, a physical space, an unused corner of the school grounds that the school was willing to allocate, and a head teacher who treated the club as an asset for the school's public profile rather than a distraction from examination preparation.

At St James, the core group's initiative, a waste management programme combining recycling, a plastic reduction campaign, and composting, launched with comparable initial energy but

showed clearer signs of the sustainability problem the play itself dramatises through Bola's character. One student, reflecting on the group's own early momentum, observed that "we started strong like Bola starts strong" and that the group's composting system had not been properly maintained over a school holiday period, resulting in a setback the group was still addressing at the time of the interview. This is precisely the kind of self-aware, unflattering account that a purely promotional narrative of the project would tend to omit, and its presence here is offered as evidence that participants were capable of, and willing to voice, critical reflection on their own project's shortfalls, not only on the play's fictional failures.

At David Livingstone, students launched a peer-education campaign combining interactive presentations, a modest social media component, and a community tree-planting event, oriented more toward awareness and advocacy than toward the infrastructure-building seen at Mabhikwa. One student explicitly framed this choice as a considered response to the play's critique of empty rhetoric, arguing that the group wanted to avoid Thunde's error of announcing grand plans it could not deliver, and had therefore scaled its ambitions to what the group could sustain without teacher-dependent resources.

Read together, these three trajectories do not support a single, uniform claim that problem-posing theatre "produces sustained action." They support a more qualified claim: that the theatrical and dialogic stages of the intervention reliably produced the reflective and motivational preconditions for action, but that whether reflection converted into durable praxis depended heavily on locally specific institutional supports, a committed teacher, available physical space, and a head teacher willing to treat the initiative as a school asset, that the EME Project's own design did not supply and could not guarantee. This is consistent with the theoretical tension identified in Section 2: strategic environmental communication theory's instrumentalism, and its tendency to treat communication as capable of substituting for missing resources, offers a less complete account of the St James composting setback than a materialist reading that simply notes the school lacked the capacity to sustain the system through a holiday period regardless of how motivated its students were.

Beyond the classroom: ripple effects and their limits

Beyond the three schools, the project generated some evidence of wider social effects, though this evidence is more fragmentary and harder to verify than the school-based findings above,

and is reported here with corresponding caution. One student at Mabhikwa described explaining climate change to his grandmother using her long experience of changing rainfall and farming conditions, an exchange he characterised as a genuinely two-way conversation in which her older knowledge of the land supplemented, rather than simply corrected, what he had learned. A community health worker who attended one of the students' skits observed that the performance appeared to engage villagers more readily than a conventional health talk, and reported anecdotal evidence of behaviour change, specifically households fixing leaking taps, following the event.

These accounts are suggestive rather than demonstrated. They rest on single informants describing effects on people not interviewed for this study, and the paper provides no independent evidence that the borehole-fixing or leak-repairing behaviours reported occurred at any scale or persisted. They are included because they point toward a genuine and under-studied possibility that problem-posing theatre's effects may propagate through informal, intergenerational channels that a school-bounded evaluation design is not well equipped to capture, but this paper is careful not to claim more for this finding than the evidence supports. Establishing whether this ripple pattern is real, and if so, how far it extends, would require a study specifically designed to trace community-level effects, with its own sampling and consent process for community members.

Discussion

The findings support a claim about problem-posing theatre's value as a climate pedagogy in this setting. Theatre, and specifically the satirical, character-driven form used in *Eme*, appears well suited to the first stage of Freire's cycle: it created a shared, socially licensed occasion for naming environmental grievances that students, in several cases, already held but had not previously voiced in a school setting, and at two of the three schools this naming extended into genuine political analysis rather than stopping at behavioural prescription. This finding both confirms and qualifies Freire's account. It confirms that dialogic, problem-posing pedagogy can move students toward the kind of structural, rather than individualising, understanding of a social problem that conscientisation names. It qualifies that account by showing how unevenly this movement occurred across otherwise similar schools, and by locating the source of that unevenness in institutional and cultural conditions, classroom hierarchy, scheduling, and

the presence or absence of teacher support, that lie outside the theatrical intervention's own control. A Freirean reading that attributes conscientisation solely to the pedagogical method, without attending to the institutional context in which that method is deployed, would not adequately explain the gap between David Livingstone and St James documented in Section 4.2.

The findings speak more ambivalently to strategic environmental communication theory's claim that effective communication can create salience, foster agency, and enable social learning. The EME Project's design was, in many respects, a textbook implementation of these principles: it was culturally resonant, used satire to bridge scientific and lived registers, and built-in structured opportunities for dialogue and co-creation. The theory's predictions held least well where it assumed that communication of this kind could substitute for missing material resources. The St James composting setback and the sceptical student's "theatre pretending to be policy" comment are both, in different registers, direct challenges to that assumption. Communication, however well designed, did not resource a rainwater harvesting system that a school could not otherwise afford, and no amount of dialogic sophistication closed that gap. This is not a failure of the theory so much as evidence of its limit: strategic communication theory is better equipped to explain why students became motivated than to explain why that motivation did, or did not, survive contact with institutional resource constraints.

Read against each other, the two frameworks together produce a more complete, and more critical, account of the EME Project than either would alone. Freire's framework, on its own, risks treating the depth of student reflection as the primary measure of success, which would over-credit the project at David Livingstone and Mabhikwa while under-explaining the St James pattern. Strategic communication theory, on its own, risks reducing the intervention to a question of message design, which would miss what was genuinely emancipatory, rather than merely persuasive, about students at David Livingstone naming a specific councillor's diversion of a reforestation grant. The tension between the two frameworks, rather than their reconciliation, is this paper's central theoretical contribution: problem-posing theatre in this setting functioned simultaneously as a conscientising practice and as a strategic communication intervention, and its outcomes are best explained by attending to where these two logics reinforced each other, as in the Mabhikwa Green Warriors club, and where they diverged, as in the gap between reflective depth and resourced action visible at St James.

The tension between participatory ideals and institutional realities documented here is not unique to this project, and situates the EME findings within a wider, ongoing debate about the politics of participation in theatre for development. Critics of the field have long warned that participatory methods can produce what amounts to the performance of empowerment, students speaking the language of agency and critical consciousness, without a corresponding shift in the structures that determine what that agency can accomplish (Etherton & Prentki, 2006). The findings here do not fully bear out that critique, since the Mabhikwa and, to a lesser extent, David Livingstone material shows genuine, sustained praxis rather than merely its performance. But they do not fully refute it either. The St James pattern, and the sceptical student's comment in particular, are a warning against assuming that fluency in the vocabulary of conscientisation is itself evidence that conscientisation, in Freire's fuller sense of reflection completing itself in transformative action, has occurred. Future evaluations of theatre for development interventions in similar settings would do well to build in exactly this distinction from the outset, rather than treating articulate reflection as a sufficient proxy for outcome.

This study also makes a modest methodological point. Much of the theatre for development literature evaluates interventions shortly after their conclusion and through instruments that invite participants to describe the experience favourably. The variation documented here across three schools, and particularly the inclusion of the St James and sceptical-student material, was only possible because the coding scheme deliberately treated resistance and disengagement as a category from the outset rather than as noise. Studies that do not build in this deliberate attention to disconfirming evidence risk systematically overestimating the reach of participatory arts interventions, not through dishonesty, but through a design not built to notice where the intervention did not work.

Conclusion

This paper asked under what conditions problem-posing theatre facilitates climate engagement among Zimbabwean secondary school students, and where its limits lie. The EME Project generated genuine, if unevenly distributed, movement toward the kind of critical, structurally aware environmental understanding that Freire's concept of conscientisation names, and produced at least one clearly sustained instance of praxis, the Mabhikwa Green Warriors club,

alongside more partial or fragile outcomes at the other two schools. The paper's central contribution is theoretical: reading the findings through the tension between Freire's emancipatory framework and strategic environmental communication theory's instrumentalism, rather than treating the two as interchangeable, makes visible a distinction the wider theatre for development literature often collapses, between students becoming fluent in the language and feeling of critical consciousness and students' reflection actually completing itself in resourced, durable action. The gap between these two things, evident in the St James data in particular, is where this paper locates the real limits of what a single theatrical intervention, however well designed, can accomplish absent sustained institutional support.

These claims should be read against the study's evident limitations. This is a single intervention studied through self-report data collected within weeks of its conclusion, without a comparison group, and with a core participant sample selected by teachers based on prior interest, all of which caution against generalising the findings beyond this specific project and these three schools. The researcher's dual role as both practitioner and analyst, disclosed in Section 3.4, further means the findings should be read as a critically reflexive practitioner account rather than as external evaluation, though the paper has tried, through its deliberate attention to resistance and disengagement, to mitigate rather than deny that positioning.

Future research in this area would benefit from a longitudinal design capable of tracking whether initiatives like the Mabhikwa Green Warriors club persist beyond the six-month window reported here, from a comparative design that could isolate the intervention's effect from general developmental or contextual change, and from closer, ethnographically grounded attention to why some schools' institutional cultures support the translation of reflection into action while others do not. Such research might also usefully extend beyond the school gate to test, with appropriate consent from community members themselves, whether the ripple effects reported in Section 4.4 are real and at what scale they operate. What this study can claim, more modestly than its own project documentation once did, is that problem-posing theatre is a genuinely useful tool for opening a space in which Zimbabwean secondary school students can name and begin to act on the environmental problems shaping their communities, and that whether that opening closes into lasting change depends less on the theatre itself than on what institutional support meets it afterwards.

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