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# CHANGING THE STORY

## Challenging the Message of the Medium: Scaling Participatory Arts Projects and the Creativity Agenda in Kenya

*Paul Cooke, Simon Peter Otieno and Jane Plastow*

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## **Chapter Four**

### **Challenging the Message of the Medium: Scaling Participatory Arts Projects and the Creativity Agenda in Kenya**

**Paul Cooke, Simon Peter Otieno  
and Jane Plastow**

#### **Introduction**

Kayole Primary School in Nairobi's Eastland estate, 2003: children sit in groups busily composing stories, songs and dances. The room is a hive of activity. One child chooses a theme, another comes up with lyrics to best communicate the theme, another works on the rhythm and tune they feel best captures their ideas. Others think about the choreography that can be used to enhance the music and complete the performance of the song they are producing. Still others are introduced to using a camera, and prepare to film the performance. This was the starting point for an arts-based participatory action research project (PAR) focussed on evaluating methods for generating child-to-child communication in Kenya, led by Simon Peter Otieno and supervised by Jane Plastow at the University of Leeds (Otieno 2009).

The compositions and performances that were generated by this workshop focused on the messages that the children wanted to relay to their peers about the issues that they saw directly affecting their lives. Key issues that came up in the songs included the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and drug abuse on their communities, as well as the wider context of crime generated by these scourges. Kenya, like many countries in the Global South, has seen a huge growth in arts-based PAR projects in recent years (World Bank 2002; Kendle 2010; Andemicael 2011; Shaw 2017; Vanner and Kimani 2017). As Jackie Shaw notes, while such projects are frequently

constructed to generate policy-level impact via community-led dialogue, the greatest insights offered by these kinds of arts-based interventions often (and frequently no less significantly) 'lie in both the small gains and shifts that matte[r] to participants' (Shaw 2017, p.6). Indeed, as noted in the introduction to this volume, these are the very insights that can then be lost as organisations seek to 'scale up' such work. The project described above certainly generated numerous 'small gains and shifts', helping to build the confidence and raise the aspiration of participants, supporting them to imagine a life beyond the slums they live in and, indeed, in a few cases leading them to train for a career in film and television production. However, what is interesting about Otieno's project is that it was the effective communication of the project's participant-centred impact that ultimately also led to policy change. In this chapter we wish to reflect upon the nature of this impact, and in particular the central role of *creativity* in achieving policy-level impact through this work in Kenya, discussing in some detail a recent project with which all three authors of this chapter have been involved that was designed to scale up the impact of Otieno's original PAR activities. This project brought together Otieno's experience as a film and theatre maker, Plastow's theatre expertise and knowledge of East-African cultural forms and Cooke's work as a participatory filmmaker in development settings, and focussed on story generation and filmmaking skills, aspects of the original work that grew in importance as the project developed. In this chapter we draw on the facilitators' experience of delivering two week-long national teacher-training workshops in February and June 2018 at Tom Mboya College, Kisumu, questionnaire responses from, and interviews with, participants from both workshops as well as follow-up interviews four months later with participants from the first workshop and some of the children they teach, in order to explore the growing

significance of creative practice within the Kenyan school curriculum. We discuss the role of the *facilitator as artist*, and the need to understand the particular aesthetic tradition within which a given community is working, while also challenging participants to look beyond this tradition. We reflect upon the role of the 'message' in such work (central to the original project), and how message-focussed projects can both help to enhance and hinder the creative skills development of those involved. In particular, we explore the role of the child in this process, looking at how the child-centred approach of Otieno's original project can be lost in the pragmatic reality, and resourcing challenges, of the teacher's everyday experience. This is also often not helped by the ingrained attitudes of some parents and teachers who can be cynical towards the role of creative practice in education, despite the current ostensibly very supportive environment for the arts generally, and film in particular, in Kenya.

### **Theatre and Film in Schools in Kenya**

The impact of Otieno's project was felt long after the end of the research. Indeed, he has continued to work with this group, with 'old' graduates returning to support younger students. This is now a well-established youth club, with a steady membership of around 30 young people who regularly produce songs, dances, films and other artistic outputs. When some of this work was shown on Citizen Television (one of the leading private television channels in Kenya) and on one of the channel's most popular shows, *Afrodizzia*, which featured the best music from Africa (January-April 2011), the Ministry of Education became curious. This curiosity ultimately led, in 2012, to the creation of a national 'Films into Schools' project, the aim of which was to set up co-curricula clubs that would encourage primary and secondary schools to

make their own films. These could then be presented at The Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival that would, from then on, also include a film strand. Here the Ministry sought to enhance and accelerate the growth of co-curricula arts clubs that had long been helping to maintain the popularity of a festival that has been an established feature of school life in Kenya since the 1950s.

The festival was set up by the British Council in 1959, when the country was still a British colony, and has continued uninterrupted ever since. Initially, the festival was very much a tool of British rule, part of a tradition of British colonialism that dated back to the 1930s when similar initiatives were set up across British African possessions. Such festivals sought, as Chris Odhiambo notes, to uphold a British understanding of 'Culture' (very much with a capital 'C'), rooted in the use of English as the primary language of performance (Odhiambo 2018). Since the end of colonial rule, nowhere else in Africa have national schools music and drama festivals continued to grow so strongly as in Kenya, helping to develop the confidence of participants and their pride in the nation. At times, particularly in the 1970s, the Drama Festival became a touchstone for cultural tensions in the country, reflecting the political debates of the day, as well as providing a vehicle for the growth of indigenous-language theatre (Otieno 2009, pp.29-30). However, as leading Kenyan theatre artist Mwangi Gichora notes, 'as most of the scripts were written by or under the close supervision of teachers, the student actors were largely used as mouth pieces to put forward the teachers' opinion on various issues' (quoted in Otieno 2013, p.145). As we shall see, this tendency has had particular implications for the introduction of film to the festival and for our subsequent work. Today, the festival involves primary, secondary and tertiary-level educational institutions and has an elaborate structure

of competition at local and regional levels, ultimately culminating in a nine-day national event that covers a huge range of categories, from the singing of classical arias to performances by gospel choirs and from indigenous story-telling to full scale original plays (Odhiambo 2016). The festival provided a ready structure within which filmmaking has been incorporated since 2012.

The growth in national film production has also been supported by the passing of the Local Content Bill in 2016, which requires all media stations to include at least 40% of material made in Kenya in their schedules (Republic of Kenya 2016). This is a major challenge to the 50-plus television companies across the country, which mostly recycle cheap international content from South America, the Philippines, Nigeria, Mexico or Hollywood (Murugi 2015). As a result the production companies have been keen to access the schools' film output. In June 2018, this led the Association of Film Producing Educational Institutions of Kenya to broker a partnership agreement on behalf of Kenyan schools with the Association of Digital Broadcasters (ADB). ADB is a group of forty-five television channels. The deal gives ADB access to the schools' audio-visual output at a fee payable every four months. This is enormously beneficial to both parties. On the part of the broadcasters, it helps them to meet the requirements of the Local Content Bill. For the schools involved, the partnership turns filmmaking from a significant financial commitment into a source of school revenue. Moreover, it also provides them with a platform through which they can potentially generate a significant audience for the stories they make into films. Thus, they will increasingly be able to showcase the talent in their institutions by taking part in the Films into Schools programme and, in so doing, open up a talent pipeline between schools and the film and television industry. On

the back of this partnership, the Kenya Films Classification Board has also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Education to support both drama and film production in schools for the next five years, waiving classification fees for all school film productions that are aired on the ADB platform. It is envisaged that these initiatives will go a long way to funding school-level film production, improving skills and, in turn, the quality of output.

There are two further contextual elements that have helped to raise the visibility of filmmaking in schools in Kenya. Firstly, all the activities outlined above have been much assisted by President Uhuru Kenyatta's personal support for the development of Kenyan filmmaking. This is due in no small part to his eldest son Jomo wishing to work in the industry. The support has been evidenced particularly in the President's office working to set up The Kenya Film School. This vocational training centre for young talent opened in 2016 with 90% of student costs covered by the state (Goro 2018). Where the President leads the Ministry of Education follows. Consequently, senior officials are being very supportive of efforts to develop filmmaking in schools, as evidenced, not least, by the various Ministry officials that supported, and indeed participated in, the Kisumu training workshops. Secondly, our project has coincided with the introduction of a new national curriculum for Kenyan schools (rollout to commence in 2019; Ndonga 2017) which is seeking to bring filmmaking and other creative practices into the classroom. As Darius Mogaka Ogutu, Director of Policy, Partnerships and East African Community Affairs at the Ministry of Education puts it, the country's new national curriculum seeks to 'make education and training count by responding to labour market needs, equipping youth with competencies in critical thinking and creativity, creating and expanding opportunities for youth re-skilling, and



enhancing skills mobility'. Here the country is seeking to align with a pan-African vision of education that 'reach[es] beyond traditional academics', to 'establish holistic, inclusive, and equitable education as a core for sustainable development, the establishment of scientific and technological innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship' (Ogutu 2017, pp.154-5). Officially at least, arts and culture are no longer considered to be a luxury only of value to the elite, but rather core to the development of the nation in the Twenty-First Century.

This is an exciting time for the arts generally, and film in particular, in Kenya. And this is not to mention the recent global success of Marvel's *The Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018), starring Lupita Nyong'o from Kisumu, which was received with excitement across the continent as the first African Marvel film — despite the fact that the majority of the film was shot in the US (Horne 2018) — as well as the nomination of the Kenyan short film *Watu Wote: All of us* (Katja Benrath, 2017), the true story of an al-Shabab terrorist attack, for Best Live Action Short Film Oscar. This excitement was palpable amongst the teachers who took part in the Kisumu workshops, many of whom saw themselves as making a significant contribution to the future of the industry, helping to produce the next generation of international Kenyan actors, directors and directors of photography. As one of our participants said in a feedback interview, they had long been aware of the power of film internationally, particularly Nigerian films. In making films in schools, they hoped that Kenya would start 'producing something closer, or even better than what the Nigerians were doing.'

Of course, all those involved in school filmmaking will not go on to careers in the film and television industry. However, in terms of social impact more broadly, if handled with care, this supportive contextual environment offers a unique opportunity for young people in Kenya to tell their own stories through film on their own terms, without inhibition or too much control. This has long been the central goal of The Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival. This is, moreover, invariably seen as an important aim of participatory filmmaking projects in development settings around the world. Introducing young people to filmmaking is generally seen as an excellent way of building their confidence, and in so doing, ensuring that their voices are heard and help to shape civil society (Bery 2003, p.108; Cooke, Dennison and Gould 2018). Kenya is seeking to effect change on a scale and with a speed seldom seen in participatory filmmaking projects. As we shall discuss further, this has been flagged as a particular challenge for those looking to create films with young people in Kenyan schools.

### **The Skills Gap in Kenyan Schools: Establishing a Child-Led Approach to Filmmaking**

Since its introduction to the Drama Festival in 2012, film has been far more popular than the organisers initially thought it would be. Otieno, supported by the Ministry of Education (under the direction of Patrick Sirengo Khaemba) initially organised a small training workshop at the University of Nairobi, at which teachers from every region were present. The organisers knew that there was a large skills gap in the country, and had estimated that there might be around eight films submitted to the festival — one from every provincial region. They received thirty-seven films, the majority of which had been made by teachers who had not attended the workshop. This was both surprising and encouraging, and the number of films at the festival has

continued to grow each year. However, as many teachers in Kenya would agree, the production of films has been racing ahead of teachers' capacity to develop the relevant skills to lead this work.

Ideally, all agree that the submitted films should be conceptualised, written, acted and edited by the young people themselves, with teacher support. However, echoing the comments of Gichora quoted above, in the early days in most cases, and now still frequently, the only substantial involvement of the young people one can guarantee in a production is in the acting. Teachers generally come up with an often melodramatic, often highly moralistic scenario, which, in some cases and to varying degrees, they develop with their student actors. Indeed, as participants at our workshops noted at times, the teachers might simply adapt a scenario that had been provided to them by an external agency:

The children might give input into the story, but some of the stories they have not made themselves. Sometimes the teacher made it. Or sometimes it was bought from the specialist. [...] The other input they give is just the acting. After that they are just consumers of the final product.

While the teachers involved generally have had some previous experience of making plays, and while they are often avid consumers of films themselves, as noted above, particularly in the early days of film being part of the festival, they tended to see a film as simply putting a camera in front of the actors and doing little more than panning across the action, occasionally zooming in on key moments. The impulse for making a film was often economic. As one of the teachers who has been involved in the Film into Schools project from the start put it:

I saw students spending a lot of time going for drama [...] So I thought we should join in the film one, because we'd just be sending our CD after recording and the students would remain in class.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, perhaps, given the cost of the equipment involved (an issue to which we shall return), film was, and continues to be seen by some, as a cost-effective way of capturing a performance and submitting this performance to the festival without having to cover the costs of lots of students having to travel and take part in multiple performances at the various levels of competition.

After the 2011 workshop, the Ministry further sought to close the skills gap by allowing schools to work with professional filmmakers who would go to into a school to help the students put together their ideas. This was meant to be a temporary step, an educational process during which children and teachers would learn together about the practical elements of filmmaking. Some of these companies were very helpful in sharing their skills with the schools, with a few schools now confident enough to make films without the help of professionals. However, others just shoot the schools' performances and deliver them ready to enter competition, leaving the majority of schools that enter films into the festival still heavily reliant on the external companies that they commission to make their films for both expertise and access to equipment. The lack of ownership of the process to date by the children involved, or even in some cases by the teachers, was particularly emphasised in our participant feedback. One teacher put it bluntly:

The children don't use cameras. They don't edit. In fact they rarely touch the camera. The best they can expect is to carry the tripod stand for the specialists. [...] The director wasn't us, though 'in writing' it would have been me, the producer would be the principal. But we really had little knowledge of what goes on.

The key barriers to more student and teacher involvement in the filmmaking process are twofold. On the one hand, the cost of hiring equipment is seen as prohibitive:

Hiring these things is quite expensive. For example, to hire a camera in Kenya for a day is 10 000 Shillings [£77]. So you cannot hire it for a whole week to train [the students] to use it because the school will have to spend

almost 100 000 Shillings, and you will be told, 'the school can't spend 100 000 Shillings in a week for one club'.

The expense of the production process has been a major hurdle for some schools, especially primary schools which are particularly poorly funded. In high school the students pay fees and so there is access to some funding, but in primary school the government funds the schools but the money is simply not enough to engage in film or video production, given the many co-curricular activities in the school's calendar including sports and music. Although, as already noted above and picked up by many of the participants in the workshops, entering a film in the festival can often be more cost-effective in terms of staff and student time, and again, as noted in feedback, professional filmmaking agencies do not come cheap; schools can be nervous about investing in equipment. As was particularly noticeable in questionnaire feedback taken from teachers at the start of the workshops, without sustained access to equipment many teachers do not feel confident to lead a practical filmmaking workshop with their students: 'It would be outrageous for me to ask [my students] to operate equipment that I am not confident about'. This state of affairs has been further exacerbated over the years, the participants also note, as winning a film prize has grown in prestige and teachers are keen to bring honour to their school through such awards. That said, teachers are also well aware of the dangers of over-reliance on professionals, and the impact this has on their children's ability to benefit fully from participation in the festival. This is in spite of the ostensibly very supportive environment for filmmaking outlined above, not least the rolling out of The Ministry of Education's new curriculum that seeks to encourage children to develop their creativity, and in which film production will be taught as a mainstream subject in high school.

In feedback, teachers repeatedly mentioned the lack of resources available to them as the most important barrier to a 'mainstreaming' of filmmaking within Kenyan schools. At the same time, it also became apparent that there was something of a 'chicken-and-egg' scenario at work. In discussion with facilitators, a number of teachers admitted that their schools actually had a camera. However, it had never been taken out of its box. Moreover, while school principals might instinctively be nervous about committing financial resources to filmmaking, the teacher's own lack of confidence made it difficult for them to make the case for filming effectively. Thus, the workshops that the team ran in 2018 were an attempt to bridge this skills gap not only to help train Kenyan teachers in filmmaking but also to support them to advocate for film as a creative medium that would help their school deliver the new Kenyan curriculum, as well as success at the festival.

As can be seen from the brief overview of the development of this project outlined above, the 2018 training weeks were not the first ever offered to teachers. However, they differed in one significant aspect. All previous Ministry-backed events had been largely theoretical. Drawing on the participatory-arts experience of the team, this project adopted a practical 'learning-by-doing' approach, an approach that was singled out in feedback as very new to participants and very much appreciated:

Before this week I was of the old school, where 'workshopping' teaching is not theoretical, not academic. But in this week I've learnt that 'hands on' kind of training, where the learner is made to do and do and do until they are fine with what they are doing is the way to go.

I have loved the manner in which the workshop was conducted because it's 'hands on'. It's not about writing. It's not about notes. Because most of us have *heard* these things before. But here you get the practical experience. You actually get to do those things that you have written about.

Over the course of each workshop, participants worked in small groups, undertaking a variety of exercises to help generate their own original stories, to learn to use the camera and record sound, to develop storyboards and shooting scripts and finally to use editing software, with the aim of producing a small number of short audio-visual outputs. The project produced music videos, documentaries and dramas. While it was clear, particularly during the first iteration of the workshop, that we attempted to produce too much (something we rectified in the second iteration), the vast majority of participants found the workshops of use. Terms such as ‘empowering’ and ‘transformative’ were common. It demystified the filmmaking process for them and, in particular, showed them that including their children in the production process need not be a challenge, but an opportunity. This was underlined by that fact that at least two of the films that were subsequently produced by participants at the first workshop won awards at the festival that year (*Pendulum*, Lions High School, Kisumu 2018; *The Son of Lwanda*, Onjiko Boys High School, Ahero). In both these cases, the children were central to preproduction and production — an innovation for both schools involved. The children created the story and they shot the film. In so doing, these films highlight the potential benefits of the children owning the production process, not only in terms of the wider, well documented, benefits of involving young people in creative projects — such as are evidenced in the impact of Otieno’s original project, already discussed — but also with regard to success in the festival. As one respondent from our first workshop, who had also submitted a film to the festival, put it:

The ideas now came not from me but from the students themselves. I learnt that if you impose a story they don’t internalise it. Now it’s their own story.

In the process, this recipient learnt that not only can the children's own story ideas be more interesting than those dreamt up by their teachers, or by external agencies, but that personal investment in 'their own story' can also lead to higher quality performances and, consequently, festival success.

While it is fair to say that the team was pleased with the initial feedback from the workshops, and the impact they appear to have had on at least some of the participants' teaching practice, it is clear that we are still at a very early stage in the development of film in Kenyan schools. Firstly, it is very obvious from feedback that, for all participants' new-found confidence in film production, many continue to see a lack of funding and equipment as a substantial barrier to them putting the workshops' lessons into practice. Secondly (and connected to this), in both *Pendulum* and *The Son of Lwanda* it was clear that the children were either less, or not at all, involved in post-production. Here both schools continued to buy in professional expertise. Post-production was noted as a particular challenge by participants — as it often is in participatory filmmaking projects. While it is relatively easy to demystify the use of the camera, simplifying many of the technical challenges and focussing instead on how to teach students to 'think in shots' — something that participants can often understand even with the simplest of video cameras (Stockman 2011, p.41) — editing can be off-putting. This is due to the need to master a generally unfamiliar software interface and the fact that participants can often not see how they would ever be able to get access to a computer with this same software installed. Moreover, it was also clear that for all their appreciation of the 'hands on' nature of the training *for them*, and the need for children to be at the heart of the production process, some remained nervous of handing over the cameras to the students,



either because it is perceived that one needs 'technical knowhow' to do things 'properly', or for fear that one of the students might 'damage something'. All of these concerns are common within participatory filmmaking projects, but all can generally be overcome by embedding filmmaking into the mainstream practice of institutions, a process that can also, hopefully, highlight to school principals the value — and ultimately cost-effectiveness — of making a long-term investment in film equipment.

### **Challenging the Message of the Medium: Moving Beyond Melodrama**

As noted above, one of the impacts of supporting children to lead the creative filmmaking process can be an improvement in the quality of the product. This is not to say that facilitators have no role to play. Thus, as well as adopting the 'hands on', 'learning-by-doing' approach to the film-training side of the workshop, as is common in participatory filmmaking projects, we were also keen to challenge the aesthetic assumptions of participants, spending more time thinking through the use of cultural forms than is often the case in such projects. Participatory filmmaking projects are often self-consciously more concerned with *process* rather than *product* in their aim to build the confidence and self-esteem of participants (Shaw 2017, p.5). In short-term participatory arts projects this can be a necessary trade off. However, here we were looking to effect a long-term cultural change. Consequently, the second element that was different to many participatory filmmaking projects, as well as to Kenyan schools' drama and film programmes, was that we would seek to think beyond the cultural norms of the festival. Specifically, we wanted to challenge the tendency to produce melodramas, often with strongly didactic social messages.

Nearly all teachers at the workshop were keen to be given techniques for script development that would enable them to draw on children's experiences and creativity. They readily agreed that drawing on children's own experiences would both make their own lives easier and enable them to make work more relevant to their pupils' lives. The challenges began as we discussed the local tendency towards the melodramatic in terms of both acting style and storyline. In the past, this has partly been because of a lack of understanding of the more intimate possibilities of film, in which emotion does not need to be projected on such a grand scale as for stage production. However a melodramatic approach to dramatic storytelling is also a Kenyan norm, undoubtedly influenced by the populist styles of widely viewed Bollywood, Nollywood and Latino films and tele-novellas. During the workshop, we had interesting debates about whether moving to a more low-key, realist approach might be seen as an anti-Kenyan, western imposition, or if it could open up interesting possibilities for nuance and naturalism. These conversations were important to conduct. All too often, westerners have imposed their ideas about desirable conventions in artistic creation, whether for novels, plays or films. It is notable that some of the most popular national theatrical traditions in Africa, developed in Somalia and Ethiopia, were not only developed in local languages, but also developed 'national' styles of performance far removed from the naturalist (Afrah 2013; Plastow 1994). During the workshops, however, we explicitly pushed for experiments with greater realism. Partly this was about opening up new possibilities. After all, each training lasted only a week and thereafter teachers were, of course, at liberty to utilise whatever style they preferred for competition entry. However, a wider argument would be that melodrama tends to work best when scripts have two-dimensional characters, clearly differentiated heroes/heroines and villains and a

straight-forward moral standpoint. If we were to present different creative opportunities, in addition to the dominant didactic, message-giving format of school drama and film, we would need to embrace new possibilities for the style of film production.

Plastow has made theatre across numerous countries in Africa and in her experience, especially in recent years in Uganda and Kenya, she has found a widespread expectation that a community, participatory or school production should have a clear social and moral 'message'. Certainly teachers see themselves as bound to inculcate morality in their pupils alongside their teaching of Maths or Geography — notwithstanding on-going issues with a minority of teachers behaving highly immorally in relation to their female pupils (Leach et al. 2003). This tendency has only been reinforced by numerous Theatre for Development pieces created by International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) or arts-based PAR projects. As Plastow has discussed in more detail elsewhere (Plastow 2009), even when such theatre purports to be practicing the widely popular Boalian Forum Theatre — a form frequently patronised by charitable organisations and PAR practitioners — which is meant to be radical and promote critical dialogue (Boal 1979) — it often dilutes its original revolutionary intentions of challenging accepted norms, and uses Boal's techniques instead to promote whatever 'message' its wider programme is endorsing.

Despite the propensity of teachers to do so, crucially, the Kenyan schools festival does not impose any requirement for message or morality. Our team was therefore keen to open up more widely imaginative conceptions of filmmaking and film content.

We wanted to encourage the idea that one might make an adventure story, a comedy or, even when making an issue-based film, that one might consider posing *dilemmas* rather than preaching particular *moralties*. This idea was very difficult for many of the teachers attending the workshop to grapple with. They had a sincere perception that it was their duty to teach right from wrong and that just as a teacher shows a pupil how to get their Maths ‘right’, so they could and should teach pupils the ‘right’ behaviour. Here our argument, strongly influenced by Freirean dialogics, was that while school teaching in Kenya might be dominated by chalk-and-talk rote learning, devoted to helping children pass exams — what Freire defines as ‘the “banking” concept of education’, in which the teacher sees it as their task to “fill the students with the contents of his narration’ (Freire 1970, pp.44-45) — filmmaking clubs are all co-curricular and can therefore embrace broader concepts of education, promoting critical thinking and imaginative engagement. Moreover, as we have discussed in this chapter, these are, of course, also core competencies the Ministry of Education wishes to introduce via the new curriculum. This thinking was genuinely hard and concerning for many teachers and led to a number of formal and informal conversations over the course of the workshops. For example, towards the end of our second training programme a hugely enthusiastic senior teacher cornered Plastow as she was chatting to Chris Odhiambo, a Kenyan visiting professor and current chair of the Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival who has written widely on Theatre for Development in Africa. What, the teacher wanted to know, did the professor think of Jane’s idea that films could explore dilemmas that might not unambiguously promote the ‘right’ behaviour?

In response to this question, we offer here an example of the way we sought to embody the idea of dilemma in the training workshop. The first day of each training week was given over to workshopping how to generate plays among the participating groups. Teachers were asked to share stories of real experiences they had had in school that were both interesting and also spoke to the state of education in the country. In groups, they then chose the particular stories they wanted to develop into a very short — no more than two minute — film. One group decided to work on a story about a teacher who, when asking his primary school pupils what they wanted to be when they grew up, was stunned when a girl answered that she wanted to be a prostitute.

The group, supported by Plastow, developed this scenario into a film with two scenes. In the first we saw four siblings, three adults and the young girl, Pendo. The parents were dead and two siblings, a male teacher and a female nurse, were living with Pendo and supporting her schooling. The household was struggling, both because of poor wages for nurses and teachers in Kenya and because the adults had taken out loans to cover training courses to support possible promotion. As a result, they were finding it hard to keep Pendo in school. As the scene opens, all are gathered to say goodbye to the fourth sibling, who has been visiting from Nairobi, thanking her for her financial support. As she is about to leave, she offers one final present to her adoring young sister: an iPhone. As it is being handed over, the nurse grabs it, insisting that an iPhone is an inappropriate gift for such a young girl and that she will keep it. This sparks an argument between the sisters, with the brother attempting, unsuccessfully, to keep the peace. The nurse accuses her sister of getting her wealth immorally. The sister replies that yes, she is a prostitute, but it is

her money that is supporting the family and keeping Pendo in school. The second scene takes place in Pendo's classroom. The teacher asks his pupils what they aspire to be when they grow up. He nods approvingly as he is told by a boy that he wants to be a doctor and by a girl that she wants to be a teacher. He then asks Pendo what she wants to be, and the film ends with her reply: 'I want to be a prostitute'.



**Fig 4.1 On the set of the film *Pendo* (Photograph by Paul Cooke).**

While clearly a film that explores issues of morality, through a process of participatory development, the group created a nuanced, ambiguous piece of drama that raises a plethora of questions about social status, mobility, opportunity and capitalism, questions that were debated by the group, highlighting the potential of such drama within an educational setting. Neither of the older sisters is shown in a particularly good light. Though, interestingly, in a hot-seating exercise the nurse sister repeatedly sought to portray herself as unambiguously 'good', similarly the other sister was nervous about defining her character as a prostitute — preferring to

use the term 'socialite', until Plastow reminded the group that the exercise was about their characters and not themselves. The group did not have enough time to fully discuss the positioning of the film vis-à-vis the various issues raised. But obviously it was this kind of moral ambiguity that the teacher was thinking of when he posed his question to Odhiambo.

## **Conclusion**

Odhiambo unequivocally supported the idea of exploring *dilemmas* as opposed to delivering *messages*, and this certainly carried weight with the teacher, but his face still spoke of doubt, and indeed dilemma, as he left us. One can argue that moralistic messages are a Kenyan mode of dramatic communication. They speak to modes of communication in church, school and family. However, they do not speak to critical thinking, imagination and creativity and this is surely a problem, if the potential of the new curriculum and the wider cultural context at play in Kenya today is to be realised. This is an issue that might ultimately be more of a barrier to success than the resource limitations pointed out by many of the participants at the workshop.

As Plastow has been making theatre with grassroots communities in East Africa in recent years, she has found herself increasingly concerned that contemporary education, for all the government's warm words about child-centred learning and its support for teaching the arts, is doing little to implement either in practice, and almost nothing to support teachers in developing their conceptualisation of education to become broader and more creative. Our workshops were a starting point for what we hope will be part of an on-going process, but they will never be enough on their own.

As the local experience of hearing stories in a familial context disappears — one that so many first and second generation African writers, such as Nobel prize winner Wole Soyinka or Kenya's own pre-eminent novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, describe as crucial to their creative education (Soyinka 1981, Ngugi 2011) — it is evidently not being replaced, or at least not replaced quickly enough, by creative education in school, or opportunities to see high quality live or filmed art works, if the new curriculum is to have any chance of success in the medium term. The arts continue to be seen by many as a luxury, an unnecessary frippery in comparison to the serious business of passing exams and making money, an attitude that is further reinforced, as feedback from our workshops made clear, by the parents of many of the children who take part in the film clubs. As one of the teachers put it: 'most of the parents say "do not participate in film production [...] because you really need to concentrate on your books"'. But in societies that fail to value imagination, playfulness and critical thought, people can be trapped in the literal, in gendered, religious, hierarchical or neo-liberal conventions that are accepted as inevitable, immutable 'truths', because no-one has ever said, 'Let's imagine a different reality'; 'Let's question whether the world can be organised differently'; 'Let's have a little fun with fantasy'. Without rich stories, any society is likely to be trapped in the status quo. Unless we can first imagine the different, the better, the more bountiful, we will never be able to find it.

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