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Experimenting with Child Empowerment through Theatre for Development (TfD) in Uganda: My Experience with a Child Rights TfD Project in Gganda-Wakiso

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Abstract

The Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees the child's freedom of expression, thought and association. It upholds child's freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kind, regardless of frontier, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any media of the child's choice. These freedoms also uphold the child's right to express an opinion and be heard and relates closely to children working and sharing ideas in groups. In Uganda, there have been attempts by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as Raising Voices, Acting for Africa and Restless Development to involve children in child rights issues but their model has largely focused on having children to participate in the NGOs' projects rather than empowering them to design and participate in their own projects. Furthermore, as Paul Moclair would put it, 'while Ugandan NGOs have convincing reasons for promoting children's participation, their goals of participation are primarily designed for the consumption of the donors whose perceptions of development remain dominated by products rather than processes'(Moclair 2009). The school environment in Uganda could offer opportunities to foster child empowerment since children spend most of their time at school. However, this is hampered by authoritarian power relations between the teachers and the learners and a learning model where children are treated as empty pinchers waiting to be filled with knowledge. In this article I analyse using my practical experience with a Child Rights TfD project in a school community in Gganda Wakiso, Central Uganda how TfD can be used to empower children in analysing issues affecting their lives. The article argues that if children are facilitated to participate in making theatre focusing about their needs, they are given opportunity to

learn, reflect and express their voice on issues which affect their lives. In short, they engage in an empowering and transformative process.

Introduction

Drawing from Freire's (1970) concept of problem posing education, effective Theatre for Development (TfD) practice promotes a democratic working relation where members of the participating community work together with the animators or facilitators on equal-to-equal or subject-to-subject terms. As such, it advocates a working relationship which eschews power imbalances to ensure that all who participate in the process have an equal stake in deciding how they want to change their situation. With the promulgation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) by the United Nations Assembly in 1989 and its ratification in 1991, development agencies concerned with children such as Save the Children (SC UK) and United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF have experimented with how TfD's attribute of democratic participation can be deployed to engage children in analysing issues affecting their lives. Examples of such experiments include the SC UK work facilitated by Michael Etherton and involving workshops in South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, India and Ladakh (Etherton 2009), the SC UK funded work in Bangladesh faciliated by Asif Munier and Michael Etherton (Munier & Etherton 2006) and the UNICEF funded child rights theatre in Sudan (Moclair 2009).

In Uganda, there have been attempts by Non-Governmental Organisations NGOs) such as Raising Voices, Acting for Africa and Restless Development to involve children in child rights issues but their model has largely focused on having children participate in the NGOs projects rather than engaging them in designing their own projects. Furthermore, as Paul Moclair would put it, 'while Ugandan NGOs have convincing reasons for promoting children's participation, their goals of participation are primarily designed for the consumption of the donors whose perceptions of development remain dominated by products rather than processes'(Moclair 2009).

In this article I discuss using my Practice as Research (PaR) experience with a Child Rights TfD project in a school community Gganda Wakiso, Central Uganda how TfD can be used to engage and empower children in analysing issues affecting their lives.

Choosing the Gganda community

Having been resident in the Gganda community for almost a decade, I was motivated to intervene in the awful conditions in which the people live. As a resident, I had experienced the socio-cultural, political and economic complications of living in the area, including lack of health care facilities, lack of garbage disposal modalities, poor roads and transport infrastructure, and lack of effective social services. These issues were compounded by the spiritual beliefs and practices of the Indigenous settlers of the area. There were many 'witch doctor' shrines in the area which indicated practices connected to human sacrifice and trafficking of children in the area.

The demographic set up of Gganda changed significantly between 2006 and 2008. The growth of the city of Kampala led to the outer migration of city dwellers into sparsely populated, predominantly indigenous-settled rural areas, such as Gganda. However, this urban expropriation of land by people needing a home near their place of work occurred without formal urban planning processes leading to persistent poor living conditions. Land sales were unregulated meaning that plot size depended on the amount of money a buyer had. This resulted in uneven development with the smaller (inexpensive) plots lacking space and/or proper access ways in and out. The area continues to lack properly demarcated roads, piped water networks, sufficient electricity transmission lines and government health facilities. The nearest government health facility for the people of Gganda is located four kilometres away in Nansana municipality, a neighbouring local administrative area. This distance seems small, but bad road network makes the place difficult to access. For a now densely populated area such as Gganda, the lack of a public health facility is problematic, especially in terms of maternal and infant health. Unregulated privately-owned health providers have moved in to fill the gap. This often leads to poor diagnosis of diseases and high mortality rates. Apart from a few emerging primary and secondary private schools, there was not a single government school in Gganda.

In brief, my own preliminary research in the area identified several unfavourable living conditions such as traditional beliefs and superstitions, poor sanitation, lack of basic facilities such as water, schools, health centres, poor drainage of roads which become impassable during rainy season, youth unemployment, high rates of school drop outs, teenage pregnancies, child neglect and trafficking and child human sacrifice. I was convinced that it was imperative to

engage the children in analysing and dialoguing about these issues as part of their right to receive and share information.

Siting the TfD Project in a School

After three days of negotiating entry into the community, I approached the head teacher of St Kizito Primary School, a community school in the area. My aim of meeting her was to make a formal request so that she would allow us to hold our community theatre workshop meetings in the school yard. Before I could make the request, I shared with her my intent to work with young people in the community so that together we would analyse issues that affect them and find appropriate solutions. I explained to her that the young people would create a play or plays revolving around the issues identified which would finally be performed to the whole community culminating in further community dialogue and action.

The head teacher welcomed the idea observing that this provided an opportunity for the school to demonstrate its relevancy to the community. She went on to explain how the Ministry of Education measures the performance of schools observing that, "when the education office is rating school performance, they look at the school's performance in national examinations and also at the impact it has made in its immediate community".

In order to create a tangible partnership between the school and the community, I proposed to the head teacher that we involve some young people of the school in the project. She welcomed the idea and allowed us to work with pupils in year six, many of whom were aged 13-14years. As facilitator I had achieved access into the community and the ball was in my hands to initiate and develop a child led TfD project. We agreed with the head teacher that the young people who were not part of the school but willing to participate would be allowed to come into the school and take part in the project. But as it will become apparent, the four young boys who did not belong to the school dropped out of the project. They only attended two initial workshops. It seemed to me that they felt out of place participating with the majority of children within the school.

Based on the programme of the school, we would work for fourteen days at 4:30pm to 6:30 each day after class work. Since children from year one to five went home at 4pm, the school premises would be quiet and conducive for our creative work. It was the custom of the school to have year six pupils remain in the school for extra lessons between 4:30pm to 6:30pm. Given

that the parents already knew about this extra arrangement, we did not have to explain to them why the children remained at school beyond 4pm. In the discussion with the head teacher, we agreed on the idea to have the children perform their plays at an expected parents meeting in the school which would help them articulate their concerns. To me, this was a good opportunity to involve the power base of the community.

I dropped my initial idea of a young people's TfD project in Gganda in preference for a project in a school because my efforts at community mobilisation had yielded little effect (six participants). It was possible for me to continue with the six young people since some participatory theatre efforts may start with even a fewer number of people (Clifford & Hermann, 1999: 22). I did not make this choice because I was afraid that it would be difficult to retain the commitment of the six young people. I did not have money to provide even the basic incentives such as refreshments and transport re-imbursements. I easily opted for the school participants because they would come to school with or without my incentives. It would be commendable for to give the children some refreshments, but this did not seem obligatory. This may imply that refreshments and transport refunds are used to buy the participants into TfD projects, but the point I am making here is that small enticements aid in the process of mobilisation and group building.

Envisioning the Project: Defining my Paradigm of Practice

The critical methodological framework for my practice was first and foremost the core principles of TfD practice which include participation, passion, spontaneous improvisation and ownership. As such, the success of my work would be measured based on the extent to which it would foster an integral process of participation and giving voice to the participants.

In order to avoid exogenous, deterministic and prescriptive approaches of TfD practice, I was keen to implement an endogenous process privileging the active participation of the community. I planned a participatory theatre process where participation would be both integral and transformational as opposed to being extrinsic and instrumental. Adopting an integral and transformational model means that the children would become a central entity in the TfD process, participating in all the stages instead of being consumers of an already finished product.

As participatory development expert Guy Bessette has put it, 'we cannot refer to a participatory approach when researchers and development practitioners use participatory techniques in contexts where they have already decided on the issue' (Bessette, 2004:14). I

planned a participatory research process where the issues to be explored by the community would be determined by them through a process of collective research and analysis.

In order to implement the envisaged endogenous, bottom-up TfD process, I planned to adopt different dramatic frames. These included the story telling frame and the Augusto Boal participatory theatre frame. From the experience of successful TfD practitioners such as Tim Prentki (2003), Ngugi wa Thiongo (1986) and Mangeni (2007), these approaches ensure that the participants are brought to the centre of the process. I was aware that the Augusto Boal participatory theatre frame and the story telling frame may be abused especially if the issues and the stories used are externally determined.

The use of the storytelling frame would be twofold. First, it would involve the use of traditional story such as a folktale or a fairy tale as a springboard for community analysis and research; a process which may be described as the cultural performance model (see Mangeni 2007). The transformative way of using this approach would be to have the participants choose a well-known traditional story from their community, narrate it to each other and then move to adapting the characters and situations in the story to the issues being explored. In this way, the participants would be involved in the process of collective analysis from the onset. This would be different from an instrumental model in which case I would choose the story for them and invite them to use the story to analyse their issues.

Second, storytelling would involve facilitating members of the target community in the process of telling stories revolving around problems that affect their lives. After Prentki (2003) and Moclair (2009), the application of storytelling as a paradigm for participatory research in my TfD process would involve facilitating the communities in telling stories that explore their problems and in effect unveil the contradictions underlying their suffering. These stories would then be used as raw material for community dialogue and improvisation. As Prentki observes about his work in Southern India, 'the choice of which stories to use in devising would be left to the participants. My main function as facilitator during this phase would be to help to expose the contradictions within the stories and how these might contribute to the structure of the devising' (2003). In doing so, my practice would circumvent the idea of imposing my own stories and problems on the participants.

The application of dramatic techniques borrowed from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, namely image theatre and simultaneous dramaturgy, aims to enable communities

collectively to realize their problems. A similar process of community research, reflection and analysis has been experimented with by Michael Etherton (2009) in child rights Theatre for Development workshops in South Asia and Africa.

Using his model, my process of community research and analysis would involve some of the following processes: Imaging in order to explore community problems; devising incomplete dramas in small groups; criticizing the incomplete dramas by the whole group in order to check the quality of characters and situations; revising the scenes to develop them further and make the characters more paradoxical; and, re-analysis and revision of the dramas until everyone feels that the plays are communicating precisely the contradictory complexity of the problems in the community or echo the truth in the lives of community members (see Etherton, 2009 for details of his approach).

I worked with another person—Grace Mary Mbabazi whom I would rather loosely describe as a co-facilitator. I say loosely because Grace, though interested in the arts work was not proficient in the TfD process. She is a business professional whose interest is to work with people especially women in order to educate them about financial literacy skills. She picked interest in my work because in our pre-project preparations, I was talking of a process which would bring people together so that through performance they can analyse issues that affect their lives, something she desired to do in her community development practice. I did not engage Grace in the technical facilitation aspects of the process. Rather, she supported me in other important aspects of the process such as taking photographs, recording videos of the process and recording stories from the participants, things which I could not do myself alongside facilitation.

Engaging her at the level of real co-facilitation would require me to give her detailed training in TfD facilitation as Plastow did for anthropologist McQuaid in the Walukuba project (see Keneth Bamuturaki 2016). I did not do this because of the time available for me to complete my research. However before each session we would discuss the process so that all of us would have a clear picture of what would be done.

The decision to work almost as a lone facilitator required me to be aware of the disadvantages associated with it such as the 'sheer pressure of taking up the responsibility all the time, which can feel lonely and stressful' (Clifford & Hermann, 1999: 22). I had to think about how I would support myself in issues such as controlling anger. I invited Grace to closely

monitor my engagement of the participants and we had frequent meetings to talk through the process.

First Steps: The First Workshop

The first workshop took place shortly after permissions to work with young people in the school on school premises had been obtained. It included a number of activities: an introduction from the project facilitator (myself); identification and prioritisation of the issues to be explored; and group building exercises. The aim of this first workshop was to interest the participants in the project and provide them with information to enable them to make an informed choice about their participation. It is true that at their age, the children did not have the capacity to give informed consent, but the point I am making here is that the children had the choice whether to participate or not. I discussed the school authorities about the freedom of choice the children had.

From the onset of the project, I was aware of the prevailing power relationships and dynamics. The atmosphere in this school community was one informed by a long standing tradition of despotism common in Ugandan schools where the teacher is an all-powerful person with the duty of forcing learners to cram the material studied and always inclined to forcing the learners into submission. This kind of power relationship was easily seen in the school as the teachers were always holding sticks/canes to threaten and punish any child who would not comply with the school rules.

On the day of the first workshop, when I approached the space in which I would meet the participants, I realized that the children were still with two teachers. Fearing that I would disrupt the class, I went back to the office and informed the head teacher that the class was still busy with two teachers. She told me that she had requested the teachers to remain in the class and help me to control the children so that their behaviour does not present a problem to the programme. This seemed a courteous gesture but served to further exemplify the fact that the atmosphere in the school was one where the teachers excessively controlled and suppressed the voices of the children. Of the two teachers, one of the teachers quietly opted out after the initial session. I continued working with the remaining class teacher who supported us with organisational issues. This teacher understood the ethos of our work. Never did she threaten children with punishment.

The atmosphere of threat of punishment in the school may sound terrifying for a western developed world readership, but it is a common practice in Uganda and Africa in general. In Uganda, with the introduction of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) programme in 1996,

corporal punishments were outlawed in schools, but teachers continue to administer them as a way of instilling discipline in the children. Such an environment of threat of punishment raises myriad questions: how possible would it be to execute a participatory democratic TfD processes in such circumstances? How would I ensure that people/children were not pretending with expressing themselves when actually they are afraid of doing so? It also raised the question of how much time was needed to negotiate a way through such a history of oppression of young people.

The operations of power in the school confirmed that I had to democratise the space/process and enable the participants to exercise their often-suppressed voices. It is true that democratising the space/process in a milieu of deeply entrenched historical oppression is not always smooth in the short term, but I had to lead the participants to understand that no one would be punished for expressing her/himself.

In introducing the project to the participants, I explained that it was going to be a forum in which the participants would exercise their voice on the issues in the community which affect their lives as children. I emphasised, in a language that would be understood by the children, that, unlike in the traditional learning situations where the teacher is the only esteemed source of knowledge, in our project the teachers and the participants would learn from one another. I explained further that our work was a space where everyone would be free to express themselves on issues they felt were important and promised them that there would be no "kiboko". The word kiboko in Ugandan schools is used to refer to corporal punishment through caning, an institutionalised correctional practice. Freedom of expression by the participants would be deciphered from the enthusiasm with which they shared stories and engaged group activities.

To balance the power relations between the children and I, I took on the twofold role of facilitator-participant. The ever-present teacher was not required to directly participate. Her role was to provide moral support. She moved around watching the groups work, this time without a stick in her hands. As facilitator-participant, I stood with participants in the circle modelling participation in various activities. At the same time, I inspired, led, guided, corrected and demonstrated during the sessions when these duties seemed necessary. I explained to the children that together as a group we would try to understand the issues identified in our work and in the process make plays which we would perform to our parents during a parents' meeting. I made it

explicit that the children would be the ones to make these plays focusing on issues of their own choice.

At this point, I observed that the children were very excited at the prospect of making their own plays and compared themselves to some of the local TV stars such as Kato Lubwama, Amooti Mubaranguzi and Charles James Ssenkubuge. While I knew that the aim of the TfD project was not to form/train stars, the enthusiasm shown by the children at this stage would be crucial in sustaining the energy needed in the impending participatory TfD process.

Being an already organised group, guided by formal rules and regulations, the school obliged all the learners in year six to attend. Effectively, I was establishing the project with a group of participants who could well be described as 'captive'. As a TfD practitioner, I had to foreground the idea of democracy via free choice. I explained to the teachers and the participants that one was free to keep out of the project. I knew that this feeling of choice would yield a greater sense of ownership, greater investment in the project's success and eventually greater commitment, energy and enthusiasm. Some children especially those who did not belong to the school exercised this freedom of choice and opted out as early as the end of the second workshop.

One could argue that since the children who did not belong to the school left and I was now working with participants from the school, the process had evolved into a Theatre in Education (TIE) project. This argument would be correct if my practice had involved performing a pre-packaged play in the school, offering an extrinsic process of participation. This has been the practice of theatre companies involved in Theatre in Education in Uganda such as the Ebonies and Bakayimbira Dramactors. They make a play on a theme of educational value such as teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, malaria prevention and child nutrition and then tour it in schools. After the performance, they engage the children in short-lived post-performance discussion. The focus of my work in the school was to engage the children in a participatory creative process through which they would collectively analyse the problems affecting their lives. The school setting is an appropriate setting for TfD practice. In fact TfD projects have previously been done in schools (see Mangeni, 1998) and Prentki (2006) has attempted to establish a dialectical relationship between TfD and TIE suggesting that TfD can occur in school settings especially if the practitioners extend the possibilities of existing TIE practices to foreground participation. He argues that:

Where the participants—usually children—have no choice about whether or not they engage in the process, it is straining definitions to label such a practice TfD. However, the roles of children in setting the agendas for the work—in deciding, in short, what it is to be about—can be significantly enhanced by application of Freirean principles (Prentki, 2006: 08).

In this citation Prentki suggests that for one to talk of TfD in a school context, the children should be given the opportunity to choose whether to participate in the session or not and that the participants should be afforded the opportunity of deciding what they want the work to be about through the Freirean principles of dialogue and participation. This is what my work at the school set out to achieve.

Immediately after introducing the project I told the children that I did not have the issues which we would explore in the project, instead the issues would be identified by them. I asked them to identify what issues they thought urgently needed attention from the community. The children responded with answers. The first said, "I want us to study about children". Another said "I want us to study about children rights". When I made further effort to elicit more issues from the children, it seemed apparent that all the children wanted us to explore issues related to child welfare. Finally, we concluded that our TfD project would focus on the broad theme of child rights. This issue was apparently important to the young people—either the participants themselves had been victim of rights violation or they had witnessed fellow children being abused. Child rights violation had been in issue in both the print and electronic media in Uganda and abroad for a long time. There had been widespread stories of child sacrifice and torture. One of the stories is one reported by Sadab Kitata which involved Kato Kajubi who on October 27th 2008 sacrificed Joseph Kasirye, a twelve years boy to win favours from the gods to complete a huge commercial building project. Kasirye's head and private parts were cut off and never found. After a long trial, Kajubi was found guilty and handed a life sentence (see Sadab Kitata, 2012). The other story was recorded by Akbar Jay (2015) in the Daily Mail, a UK based newspaper, reporting the horrifying rise of child human sacrifice in Uganda at the hands of witch doctors. It is still a regular occurrence to watch television news stories where dead bodies of children allegedly sacrificed are discovered with missing body parts. Concerning child torture in Uganda, there was a widespread story of a maid who was filmed battering a one year old girl in the absence of her parents (see www. Youtube.com/watch?v=4mg6cpOhTX8). This maid pleaded guilty in court and was sentenced to a four years prison term.

The idea of working around issues related to child rights and welfare as mutually agreed upon with the children was useful in light of the Convention on the Rights of the Child promulgated in 1989. It was hoped that the TfD project would give the children an opportunity to exercise some of the rights enshrined in the convention. By participating in sharing stories and analyzing issues together, they would exercise the freedom of expression outlined in article 13 of the convention. Freedom of expression as enshrined in the article includes freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kind, regardless of frontier, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any media of the child's choice. The participants would also put into effect the provisions in article 14 on the freedom of thought, which in my view upholds the child's right to express an opinion and be heard; and article 15, which guarantees the right to freedom of association and assembly and relates closely to children working and sharing ideas in groups.

While the participants in the group knew each other by virtue of having studied together and lived in the same neighbourhoods, I knew that they had not worked together on any collective creative process. I gathered from my inquiry from teachers that they had previously participated in performing arts competitions in which external trainers employed by the school coerced them to perform. I therefore knew that the starting point for this TfD process would be devoted to group building and creating a sense of collective ownership of the process which would be evident in the extent of group vitality in collective activities such as games, storytelling and improvisation.

Fostering Group Building and Ownership

As Clifford and Hermann have advised, 'for the identity of the group to be one of power, the group needs to have control over the decision making process and experience the responsibility which exists with this role' (1999: 39). Consequently, our process of group building engaged the participants in activities that would help them to begin to learn to work together with the goal of making something together. It involved fostering a sense of a group where social barriers would be broken bringing about a situation where participants would have shared ideas, concerns and goals. It involved creating an 'emotionally safe space' (Prendergast & Saxton, 2013: 33) so that the participants would become more prepared to express their opinions and feelings. As pointed

out above, an emotionally safe space in practice would involve having an environment devoid of fear to express oneself.

The key activities I deployed in the course of building the group and fostering ownership of the process included engaging in a collective activity of making ground rules, games and exercises, and other elements of participatory research. Making ground rules served two purposes, namely; creating a sense of unity of purpose and 'handing over power and the responsibility of the decision making process to the group' (Clifford & Hermann, 1999: 62). The ground rules were proposed and endorsed by the participants and they included "being serious and committed to the process, avoiding shyness, being active, speaking loudly, respecting the opinions of others and observing a good level of discipline." The group further reiterated the earlier agreed rule that there would be no corporal punishment for offenders (the no kiboko rule). In order to avoid exposing the project to potential disruption from stubborn participants who would take advantage of the absence of punishment, the group collectively agreed that if anyone broke the rules of good conduct, more than three times, he/she would be asked to leave.

In terms of games and exercises, I made use of the wealth of existing drama games provided by authors such as Clifford & Hermann's *Theatre of Empowerment* (1999), Jessica Swale's *Drama Games* (2009) and Chris Johnston's *Drama Games For Those Who Like To Say No* (2010). Games and exercises were chosen depending on their complexity and their ability to increase the vitality of the participants. In this way, I was putting into practice Warren Linds' *et al* experience that:

> As games are structured to develop from simple actions to more complex forms of inter- and intrapersonal interactions, the real value of the games lies in helping youth to express ideas and feelings in physical exercises that simultaneously develop group cohesion and trust. (2013: 40)

With this in mind, at the start of the project I chose three games that were simple and engaging enough to give the participants a taste of what the process would be. These included the *name on paper* game, the *name balls* game and *tug of war*. In the *name on paper* game, participants maintained their position in a circle. A large sheet of manila paper and marker pens were put in the centre of the circle. Participants were invited to volunteer in turns to write down their own name on the manila paper and then speak to the group about it based on points such as what it means, if they have a nickname and a story connected to it.

As facilitator-participant, I volunteered to write my name first and talk about it. I said, "my name is Keneth; it was given to me by my parents when I was a baby. My parents named me after St Keneth, a man who evangelised in Northern Ireland and Scotland." The participants continued after my example and this was continued until all the participants had shared their names.

In the *name balls* game, the participants kept their position in the circle. They were invited to throw the ball to each other as they called out their own names. In these games, my role involved demonstrating and then falling back immediately into a participant role. As Chinyowa puts it, 'in TfD, games are posited to enable and foster empowerment through development of positive attitude and group work' (Chinyowa, 2005). In line with this point, I observed that the games and exercises aimed at group building engaged the children and increased their energy. The *tug of war* game made the children work together. Looking at the participants playing games, one would get a feeling of how the group would soon work together on tasks calling for interpersonal and intergroup communication. I remember the name and paper game provided the children with the opportunity to speak about themselves at length, perhaps for the first time. The participants never wanted to stop playing the game, which signified the good level of engagement it had elicited.

Commenting on our work involving games from one of the sessions, the head teacher who had been observing us from afar said, "I saw one of my daughters who is HIV positive participating. She looked happy and that is very good. It is good that she is participating happily. I also saw another girl who had been previously shy now participating enthusiastically". The photos below shows participants engaged in the *name and paper* game.

Above: a manila paper and marker pens are the centre of focus for the whole group. Below: participants are taking turns to write their names and explain themselves to the group. Photo by Grace Mary Mbabazi

The group building process was not something needed just for opening sessions of the TfD project. Rather it was an ideal that would be rolling, each day requiring efforts to get the participants to work together. For this reason, each session would begin with appropriate games and exercises led by both myself and the participants. Consequently, as the project progressed, we had built a repertoire of games and exercise from which we would draw.

I was aware that in addition to developing a sense of group and getting participants to begin working together, they needed to learn to trust each other and advance in the world of role-play and make believe. Thus, some games and exercises were tailored to cater for these needs. Our repertoire as a result developed to include such games as Act the Fact, Small Group Trust, Bomb and Shield, and Blind Leading (see Clifford & Hermann, 1999 for detailed description of the games).

After each game, participants were invited to give feedback to the group about their experience. This would usher in moments of reflection. For example, when the participants were invited to tell their experience after the blind leading game, they variously responded, "I felt so good, I felt as if I was flying in the air, I felt I was being trusted, it was full of fun . . ." The photos below show participants engaged in trust games.

Photo by Grace Mary Mbabazi

Before each session, the participants were facilitated to reflect on the previous activities/sessions. The aim of facilitating these moments of reflection was to find out what the participants liked about the process so that we would maintain these in order to retain their enthusiasm. I further wanted to know whether the programme had caused them to think about new things they wanted to introduce into it. This would help me ascertain whether the group was growing towards greater ownership of the process.

Until now, I have shown how I made an effort to create a sense of group by making ground rules and facilitating participants in appropriate games and exercises. I have also revealed how together as a group we identified a theme for our project and how the participants chose an issue they felt was pressing and important to them. The ensuing discussion develops from the foregoing processes and examines how I deployed further creative strategies to foster child empowerment. It analyses how the group and I explored the collectively chosen theme using participatory research techniques such as storytelling and the tree exercise. The discussion also

shows how my realisation of the need for essential creative/dramatic skills compelled us to build our resource kit by developing these skills. Developing from these strategies, I discuss our collective play making process.

Exploring the Identified TfD Theme

After three sessions concentrating on group building, I determined that the group was now ready to work together and I introduced the participants to a process of exploring the theme through participatory research techniques. I ascertained readiness to work together from their level of involvement in group activities such as initiating and leading games, the desire by participant to continue working on certain activities and the observable level of enthusiasm and fun. One could argue that the participants actually enjoyed doing something different from class work, not something concerning the issues affecting their lives. Though this was likely, I argue that group enthusiasm, enjoyment and vitality were the foundation of our project. In theory and practice, the fun involved in a TfD process has been posited as the beginning of individual and collective transformation (see for example Chinyowa, 2007, 2009; Mangeni, 2007). Reflecting on the mood of fun and enthusiasm enabled by the play elements of African traditional performance forms in TfD, Chinyowa argues that:

> In development communication terms, it is the intense absorption arising from the fun or joy that seems to wield the power to move the players to another state of being. Thus, in popular theatre, the essence of play as fun, enjoyment or celebration provides the players with unusual access to a fundamental component of their lives, something which they might have lost in the struggle for survival (Chinyowa, 2005: 24-5).

Elsewhere, analysing the significance of play in TfD processes, Chinyowa observes that it fosters a transformative encounter:

> It creates new frames of existence or 'restored behaviours' that act as rehearsals for action. The whole playing process is experienced as a metaxis of seemingly irreconcilable opposites—the real and the fictional. Yet it is this metaxic encounter facilitated through play that appears to create possibilities for a real encounter with development. The transformation may occur either simultaneously within play itself or subsequent to it (Chinyowa, 2007b: 14).

Observing the atmosphere of fun in the workshops, I became aware that our work had thus far created a liminal space (Chinyowa, 2011: 343), where participants were beginning to belong

to two worlds the presentational and real, a condition which would foster effective exploration of the theme at hand.

As earlier noted, I had planned to use two strands of storytelling: the cultural performance model of story involving a folktale and the model where the participants would be led to tell stories revolving around their needs and problems. In attempting to explore the theme using the cultural performance model, I started off by getting the participants interested in telling folktales especially those which are well known in the community. The participants outlined some of these stories to include Mundu and Sera, Gipir and Labong, Ruhanga and his two sons and the Kintu and Nambi story. I tried to encourage some volunteers to narrate these stories but I did not succeed in having any narrated with proficiency.

Those who volunteered to narrate the stories would only do it in few lines without details. My plan had been to choose a story out of those narrated which could provide avenues or areas to trigger discussion on human attributes such as revenge, forgiveness, cooperation, kindness and punishment among others. I knew that the Gipir and Labong story and the Kintu and Nambi Story have these areas, but I wanted the process to begin with the participants narrating the stories well. This would help me further instil ownership of the process and to begin transferring the means of production to the participants and distributing the dynamics of power among the participants.

If I was to continue with the cultural performance model of storytelling as a tool for investigating the theme, I needed to give the participants time to go and do independent research and learn the stories. Also, I needed to involve the participants in activities that would enable them to become proficient traditional storytellers. I did not make these choices because of time limitation and decided to abandon the cultural approach to story and adopt the model where the participants would tell stories related to experiences of child rights. As already noted the time limitation was brought about by the fact my practice was time bound by having to fit in the school programme and complete the project within 14 days. My failure to devote enough time to facilitate the choices I had to make emphasises the significance of the time factor in fostering a sustainable TfD process.

Additionally, I made this choice at this point in time because I needed to engage the participants in activities that would sustain their passions and interest in the process. The participants did not seem interested in narrating the folktales. I believe that good facilitation in

TfD requires the facilitator to have quick decision-making and judgement skills. I trust that in a TfD process involving young people or children, it can be prudent to skilfully abandon an activity that does not seem to engage and sustain the enthusiasm of the participants.

With the necessary choice made, I commenced the process of exploring the theme. Because of the need to ensure variety and ease management of the process, I divided the participants into two equal groups. The process of creating the two groups was in itself participatory and ensured that the groups had equal distribution in terms of gender. This was enabled by having boys stand next to girls in the circle. Standing in a circle in an open space, participants mentioned numbers 1 and 2 aloud until each member had either of the numbers. Those with number 1 belonged to 1 group and those with number 2 belonged to another. The same technique was used in circumstances where we needed more than two groups.

With the two groups created, group 1 was invited to stand around a microphone connected to an audio recorder and tell stories of experiences where they have seen the rights of children being abused. In the process participants narrated some of the following stories:

Story 1: In our village I know of a family where a mother died and left a child. The dad of this child married another woman. The child was put in a government school. Each time he came from school, he was denied food and made to overwork. Finally out of envy, the step mother burnt the child in the eyes and the child ended up dying.

Story 2: There is a child in our village who lost all his parents. He started staying with three relatives. The older relative loved him while the other two did not. As a result, these two relatives mistreated the child. Time came the older relative went away for some time leaving the child with the two relatives. The two relatives mistreated this child to the extent that by the time the elder relative arrived the child's health had deteriorated.

Story 3: There is a child in our place, who lost her mother. The dad married another wife who hated and mistreated the girl. One day, this woman injected the child in the foot causing disability. On another day, the woman cooked food for the child and mixed it with broken glass. The glass in the food was, however, identified by a friend of the child and the woman was taken to the police.

Group 2 was facilitated to explore the theme of children rights using the 'tree exercise' (Clifford & Hermann, 1999: 84). In this exercise, a picture of a tree was drawn on a large sheet of manila paper and placed on a table. The participants were facilitated to stand around the table in an organised circle with their hands joined to those of other participants. They were then invited to volunteer one by one to come to the table and write what they considered a cause of child abuse on the roots part of the tree and what they considered to be the consequences of child

abuse on the branches part of the tree. I observed that the level of engagement in this activity was remarkable. All volunteered to identify a cause or a consequence by marking on the tree picture.

After the participants had identified the causes and consequences of child abuse, they were requested once again, to come to the table one by one and link a cause of child abuse to a consequence. They would do this by identifying a cause and then explain in a sentence or two how this cause led to a particular consequence. So, this time the participants engaged their actions and speech. Consequently, the tree exercise provided the participants with a great opportunity to engage in collective identification of needs and analysis, a key feature of effective TfD practice. The photo below shows the participants analysing the theme of children rights using the tree exercise.

The children have identified some striking causes of child abuse such as step mothers, poverty and alcoholism. *Photo by Grace Mary Mbabazi.*

The process of participatory action research in these groups was continued in the next session with the group switching roles such that group 2 got involved in story telling while the group 1 got involved in the tree activity. This was done to ensure equal distribution of opportunity for collective participation and analysis.

Having gone thus far, my plan was to take the exploration of the theme of children's rights to another level by engaging them in more creative and dramatic processes. I planned to facilitate the participants by dividing them into groups and engaging each group in a particular creative activity. For example, one group would be invited to choose a cause and a consequence from the tree exercise and then make a frozen picture to represent them. Another group would be requested to choose a cause and consequence of child abuse from the tree exercise and then

create a dramatic narrative. Other groups would be requested to turn the stories narrated above into small dramas. These would then be shown to the whole group for collective reflection and analysis.

The challenge to this plan however was that, since the participants had not previously engaged in these activities, they needed more practical exposure to creative dramatic processes such as improvisation, storytelling and making of frozen images. I therefore decided to anchor the exploration of the theme at hand, by exposing the participants to these essential skills. We codenamed this process, "building the resource kit."

Building the Resource Kit: Learning to Collectively Create Theatre

We started the process of building our resource kit by learning improvisation skills. I began by explaining to the participants the meaning of the term improvisation, as a process of spontaneously creating dialogue, speech and action without using a written script. The beginning point of our learning to improvise was to engage in improvisation games and exercises. The choice of games and exercises was symbolic in that they pointed to the very activity of theatrical improvisation in which the participants were soon to get engaged—in these improvisation activities the participants would get involved in make believe and role play.

The first improvisation game in which the participants were facilitated to engage was the persuasion game (Clifford & Hermann, 1999: 101). In the persuasion game, the participants were asked to get into pairs and label each other as A and B. A was asked to play the parent role while B was asked to play the child role. B would persuade A for a favour such as being allowed out and to have a friend to stay over for two minutes. With the pairs and the roles of A and B determined, the pairs entered into a rehearsal period of about 15 minutes and finally volunteered to come to the middle of the circle and show their improvisation. The improvisations were spectacular as participants appeared to be absorbed in their roles and creative speech.

The aim of this game was to give the participants a feel of what it means to improvise. To give the participants an opportunity for further involvement in improvisation, participants were invited to get into pairs and improvise the action of quarrelling co-wives. Three pairs of female participants came into the middle of the circle and performed their improvisation and it was good. The only weakness of their work related to character emotions—the girls were visibly smiling yet their action involved quarrelling and a physical conflict. At first I was afraid that the participants given their tender age (12-14), could not practically grasp this concept. Underscoring

the significance of the Freirian notion of not underestimating the potential of any target community, I was surprised that the children could actually improvise.

The improvisation was taken to another level—of improvising situations around the theme at hand, children rights. Participants were facilitated to form pairs and groups of three, choose an example of violation of children rights narrated either in the stories or analysed in the tree activity and improvise a scene. The pairs and groups were given eight minutes to devise their improvisations. They used the large outdoor space to do their work. In presenting these scenes, the outdoor space in which we were working was divided into two spaces—the stage and the auditorium and a theatre performance experience was immediately created. I noted that instead of merely being an activity for developing improvisation skills, it emerged as an opportunity for further participatory research.

The participants in the process of improvising scenes exemplified the various violations of children rights in their immediate community. The scenes which were well presented articulated a host of issues such as child torture, denying the children food, denying the children love, and denying girls school fees. To devolve power from myself as facilitator, I empowered one of the participants to call out the pairs and groups of the participants to present their work. For me as facilitator, this session completely changed my patronising attitude. Before this session, my thinking was neo-colonial in the sense that I did not think that the children given their tender age (12-14 years) could present any convincing action on stage. To my surprise, the participants were very innovative, in the process presenting highly revealing scenes.

One thing I noted with keen interest in the presentation of scenes was that the participants seemed to receive the message in the scenes uncritically. When asked by the participant who was inviting the groups to perform what they liked about the performances, the participants would reply by giving the moral lesson learnt. The answers were not critical of the oppressive realities presented. They were answers which preserved the status quo. For example, in response to a scene where a child's hands were burnt for stealing 1000 Ushs, one participant said, "If you steal money, you will be burnt."

For me as facilitator, I was aware that the state of critical consciousness envisaged in TfD is much more than a moral lesson learnt. While particular awareness of the world around them in form of a moral lesson was important for the children, I was aware that TfD goes beyond this to foreground critical thinking. After the performance, I probed the young people's feelings about

the actions in the scenes. For example I asked them, "Do you think children who do not perform well at school should be tortured?" They replied in a chorus, "no." We did not explore further the issues in the scenes, but the session gave a good indication about the direction the TfD programme would take: facilitating the participants into doing deeper analysis of situations, instead of taking them at face value.

The Collective Play Making Process: Simultaneous Dramaturgy at work

Having worked on student's improvisation skills, I had planned to devote the 24th June 2014 to facilitating the participants in developing the story telling skill. The session on this day began on a low note as participants did not want to participate in storytelling activities. As facilitator, I became aware that the low level of motivation to participate had been caused by two probable factors. First, it seemed clear that the session lacked effective games and exercises that could help enliven the participants. At the beginning of the session, we had participated in only one improvisational game; hunting a lion (Johnston, 2010: 47) and immediately launched into story telling activities. Second, it appeared to me that the participants wanted to continue with improvisation of situations involving violation of children rights, which they had done in the previous session. As already noted, in the previous sessions, the participants had participated in role play situations which proved quite interesting and compelling for them.

To enliven the session, I led the participants into participatory warm-up games involving shaking different parts of the body successively until the whole body is warmed up. Thereafter, I began facilitating the participants into a higher level of improvisation. While in the previous day they had improvised in pairs, this time, they were facilitated to form groups of ten participants and instructed to improvise a play about the violation of any child right of their choice. The emerging four groups were given locations in the large outdoor space in which they would group and devise their improvisations. I moved from group to group observing their work, listening to them and giving them advice, but desisted from any attempts to dictate the theme of their chosen story and the characters involved.

When the groups had finished rehearsing their improvisations, the participants transformed themselves into an audience and each group presented its scene. In attendance, there were other members of the community who had been attracted to the school premises by the creative process and performance. After every group presentation, the participants were facilitated to

critically review the performances by spelling out their views on the quality of characters, the quality of the plot and how the performances could be improved. In this exercise, the ability of the participants to look at the issues critically was evident. The participants were able to point out the weak points of the characters and situations. One of the participants observed that, "I did not understand how the wife decided to advise the husband to seek solutions for a childless marriage from a witchdoctor." Another participant noted that he did not understand how the police got to know that a child was being sacrificed. Participants raised further issues concerning audibility, organisation of the plot and staging. I noted that the incomplete scenes were not presenting the issues in a manner that would provoke discussion and intervention in the post-performance phase. My role in the subsequent sessions would be to encourage the groups to introduce characters and situations that articulated the complex realities and contradictions in which the characters found themselves. In this way, my work with the workshop participants had begun to emulate Etherton's (2009) model earlier explained of simultaneously presenting, critiquing and sharpening scenes.

The session on the 25th June 2014 was a continuation of the previous one. It begun with a warm up activity in which the participants ran around the space without the intention to win the race. Thereafter, participants continued working in their groups to consider the feedback they had received from their peers in the previous session. I particularly advised the participants to think about the characters in the scenes inviting them to answer questions such as: who are the central characters? What are their names? How old are they? Where do they live? How do they relate to the rest of the characters in the story? In their groups, the participants were given 15 minutes to discuss their viewpoints and 15 minutes to rehearse the developments.

All the four groups made plays but the following two plays were performed in the session. Play 1 picked on the rampant crime of child sacrifice. It featured a wife who had failed to have a child for nine years. She went to a female neighbour who had experienced infertility before having a child to get some advice. The neighbour advised her to go to a witchdoctor for a solution. With her husband, the woman went to a witchdoctor who advised them to bring the head of a child to the shrine so that he could give them favours for childbirth. The next day, news of a headless body of a child which had been found on the roadside spread through the village— the couple had killed a child for sacrifice. Play 2 focused on the issue of discriminating against girl children. The play featured a polygamous man who considers boys to be more valuable than

girls. He blamed his wives for giving birth to girls all the time and subjected them and their daughters to suffering. He was seen burning the hands of the girls, making them lame and sending away his wives. This story was particularly interesting and captivating in terms of the issues it unearthed.

After each performance, the performers were asked to remain on the stage to receive further feedback from the rest of the group. Using the hot seating technique, the participants asked the performers questions and advised them how to improve the pieces. It was exciting to see the young people receive advice from their peers and use it to improve on their pieces. It was also fascinating to imagine how observant and alert the participants had been based on the comments they gave to the performers.

One key observation I need to make relates to language. In order to encourage the learners to master the English language, the language of instruction in Uganda's formal education system, children had been forbidden to speak in their local language or vernacular as it is called while at school. But when it came to play making and performance, the children could not express themselves effectively in English. I requested that the school administration give participants leave to rehearse and perform in Luganda, their native language.

It was enthralling to see how expressive the children became when they were allowed to perform in the local language. The children used the power embedded in using a language they understood most to unearth the oppressive realities children experience. This development strongly echoed bell hook's words that, 'language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in a language to recover themselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance' (2009: 81).

An important point to make here is that my work was happening in a neo-colonial environment where English remains a medium of instruction in the Ugandan education system. I had to negotiate through this neo-colonial reality to engender a process through which the participants could creatively explore their issues with freedom.

In the following session on 30th June 2014, we started with some trust exercises aimed at group building and cohesion. We then went on to reflect on the previous session. In the previous session we had noted with great concern the key problems in our theatre making process namely, staging—having the performers become aware of the extent of the stage and stay within the sight line, and making the characters in the story come alive in performance. On this day, we also tried

to emphasize the importance of a well-made story, which can be divided in scenes. We also emphasised the importance of having the performers use their imagination and experience to create dialogue.

Considering our strategies, one could argue that our work was aiming at ensuring polished performances. But the truth of the matter is that I was mindful of using the performance devising process to provide avenues for the participants to explore issues affecting their lives. The important thing to note here, which is crucial for an effective TfD process, is that it was the participants who were in the driving seat, choosing the stories, the characters and situations and creating the dialogue. I was a motivator and an inspirer working in partnership with them.

Participants were after the trust games and a moment of reflection, sent into their groups to continue developing their plays. It was exciting to see the children give each other instructions. One child would say, "Why don't you do it this way?" And the other child would follow the advice. In one of the groups, one of the children taking a particular part was absent. The children were able to improvise how the performance would move on without the absent character. In conferring with each other, I heard the participants say, "We shall indicate Jaja Ntalo's absence by saying that he died of HIV/AIDS." The photo below shows participants absorbed by the creative process.

In this picture, three groups of participants are creating their plays. One is in the forefront of the picture, another in the middle and the other in the extreme background. *Photo by Grace Mary Mbabazi.*

I observed that the level of group activity in each group showed that the participants were engaged in doing something together. To me, this indicated that some sort of transformation and empowerment was taking shape as the children learnt to express themselves and listen to one another. At the end of the session, each group were invited to present one scene from their play. The performance of these scenes was quite good with improved speech and action. The performers were passionate about what they were doing. The two weeks long creative process had given rise to four plays devised through collective effort. Our plan had been to stage the performances at a parents meeting and thereafter engage them in a post-performance discussion. This, however, did not happen as the school postponed the parents meeting to the end of the year.

Conclusion

My practical experience elaborated in this article indicates that working with children through a collective creative and performance process gives them opportunities to speak about issues which affect their lives. It gives them opportunities of inner transformation and empowerment to the extent that even those children with long muffled voices begin to speak and express their voice. To achieve this, the facilitator has to structure the process in such a way that the power to create and the means of production are transferred to the participants. It requires flexibility on the part of the facilitators, effective judgement and quick decision making skills. Through the creative process analysed in this article, the children had participated in the process of analysing the issues affecting their lives and the society in general. I had made an effort to place them at the centre of the process, by engaging them in collective activities such as games and exercises, participatory research through storytelling, collective analysis through the tree exercise, rehearsal cycles and within-process performances. By 'within-process performances' I mean children's performances before each other and their analysis and critique of each other's work.

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