

Where is My Sweet Potato? Creating Change through Forum Theatre with Street Children in Burundi

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the innovative use of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Forum Theatre) with a group of 30 street children and young people in East Africa. Drawing upon a project in Burundi, this paper reveals how participants utilized the process of performance making through Forum Theatre as a platform to make visible problems in their lives, and a vehicle to challenge inequalities, abuse and violence. The authors demonstrate how the adoption of this methodology raised questions about interactive theatre as creative activism and a tool for opening up possibilities for dialogue with a community-based audience. This paper illuminates ways in which street children, explored, examined and problematized their lived experience, through the creative lens of Forum Theatre. It argues that this methodology generated a sense of collective consciousness, through which the children and young people created personal and social change, which extended beyond the life of the project.

INTRODUCTION

This paper emerges from a short-term United Kingdom Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) joint international project, which took place in Burundi in 2019. The pump-priming project was a collaboration between two Non-Governmental Organisations; Social Action for Development (S.A.D) in Burundi and the National Association of Social Workers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (N.A.S.W, DRC) and two higher education institutions; the University of Hull (UK) and the Institute of Social Work (Tanzania). The aim was to engage with 30 hard to reach, at-risk, Burundian street children aged between 8 and 18 years, and develop knowledge that reflected the complexity of the children's local lived realities through an approach that privileges their voices and lived experiences - Forum Theatre. The GCRF 2019 Burundian project aim, foregrounded by the central theme of 'sexual, gender-based violence and abuse', was underpinned by, and aligned to, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 'Health and Wellbeing' Goal 3, 'Education' Goal 4 and 'Gender Equality' Goal 5. It is important to emphasise that the project not only emerged out of indigenous knowledge and expertise during a 2018 GCRF Tanzanian scoping event, it also aligned with the Burundian

Government's SDGs and 2025 long term vision focussed upon human capital, social cohesion and capacity building (Ministère du Plan et du Développement Communal 2011).

Background

East African countries across the sub-Saharan African region such as Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) feature amongst the least developed countries according to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). These countries have experienced widespread socio-political insecurity and armed conflict, including genocide (SIDA 2016; 2017; Spitzer 2017). Burundi, a densely populated country, colonised by Germany and then Belgium, has experienced much violence and witnessed the massacre and persecution of some of its citizens (Boyce and Yarnell 2016; Muchiri et al. 2019). According to Boyce and Yarnell (2016) since 2015 the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has been host to nearly 23,000 Burundians who have sought refuge from political violence, with many more citizens remaining displaced internally and unable to leave Burundi. Conflicts in East African countries have resulted in the violation of women and children's basic human rights, gender-based violence, displacement,

discrimination and the use of children as child soldiers (Elbert et al. 2013; UNFPA 2017; 2018). Widespread poverty is a significant problem, bringing many challenges, including gender inequality (Twikirize 2014a). Spitzer (2017) observes that 81.3 percent of the Burundian population lived on less than US\$1.25 a day between 2009 and 2011. In addition, Fondation AVSI et al. (n.d.) highlight concerns regarding household poverty and the exploitation of children through child labour and domestic servitude which, in turn, exposes children to serious risk and disease, long working hours, and physical and psychological violence. Established NGOs such as Social Action for Development in Burundi have engaged in community-based development work to address issues commensurate with the sustainable development challenges including education, health and gender inequality, as a means of problem-solving with communities in Burundi.

A key concern for writers on social work in Africa, and East African countries more specifically, is the over-reliance on Western theories, models, literature and practice for addressing problems and traumatic events in Africa (Twikirize 2014a,b; Mabeyo and Kiwelu 2019; Rutikanga 2019). It is essential that cultural context, local realities and indigenous ways of working inform practices to enable communities to mobilise their resources and develop strategies to create sustainable change. This paper draws upon the employment of Boal's (1992; 2008) creative practices known as 'Theatre of the Oppressed', and Forum Theatre in particular, in a community-based project. Following a brief explication of Boal's Forum Theatre methodology, its conceptualisation and practice in the context of this East African GCRF project, we then draw upon examples from the games, images, improvisations and themes to critically examine the multi-layered inequalities emerging from the children's everyday lived experiences as they engaged in the applied theatre process. The second part of the paper discusses the children's experiences of personal growth, collective consciousness and their action to create change; and here the relevance of Forum Theatre will be demonstrated. The conclusion argues that this project offered a culturally relevant platform for these Burundian street children to further the transformational process experienced in, and through, Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed'.

METHODOLOGY

Forum Theatre and The Burundian Project

Theatre of the Oppressed, developed by Brazilian political activist and theatre director Augusto Boal provided the Burundian project with a vehicle for theatricalising community-based social problems, and, in doing so, provided participants with an opportunity to foster creative activism (Boal 1992; 2008). Crucially, Boal's methodology is "founded on local rather than foreign experience and sensibilities" (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 1994: 2), and relies heavily upon project participants' knowledge, borne of their lived realities, to develop their Forum Theatre performance. Consequently, this went some small way to redressing the power differential created through the implementation of the methodology by a UK partner. The project involved a total of five days, with four days of intensive participatory theatre workshops followed by a final day staging the Forum Theatre event led by the UK partner.

The project commenced with a full day workshop with 10 mentors (street children), a Burundian NGO, a Congolese NGO and a Tanzanian Academic (all social workers). A Burundian NGO child protection social worker acted as one of the translators. Three intensive days of workshops with 20 street children followed and engaged the mentors in facilitating some of the exercises and activities. The fifth, and final, day culminated in a Forum Theatre performance developed by the participants. This journey provided the context for critical exploration of a number of emergent sub-themes that became the subject matter featured in the final troublesome and transformative Forum Theatre piece 'Where is my Sweet Potato'. Posing problematic constructions of their lived experience to a Burundian community audience of 30 ensured the solutions acted out, and critical dialogue created, were culturally meaningful and locally driven.

Boal's 'Forum Theatre', a category of Theatre of the Oppressed, requires an audience who relate to the subject matter of the piece. Not least because the approach is pedagogical, it shifts the audience from the position of passive observer of a performance, to engaged 'spect-actor' in the dramatic action unfolding between protagonist (oppressed) and antagonist (oppressor) (Boal

1992; 2008). Indeed, a key aspect of Forum Theatre is its focus upon providing “spectators themselves [with the] opportunity to discover their own solutions to their collective problems” (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 1994: 2) in what Boal describes as ‘an artistic and intellectual game’ (1992: 19).

The Joker (facilitator/leader) in Forum Theatre provides the link between the participants/actors, who develop and perform the Forum piece, and the audience/spect-actors who respond. Through participation, with the Joker as mediator, the spect-actors stop the performance, replace the main protagonist and enact new solutions to the challenges observed (Boal 2008). This creates a Forum, not of catharsis, but of discussion, debate, problem solving and dynamism as the spect-actor attempts to create change through participation (Boal 2008). Essentially, Forum Theatre is a method for exploring and rehearsing actions people can take to transform their world (Boal 2008). Our rationale for adopting the Forum Theatre methodology within the GCRF project was its ability to illuminate the culturally context specific issues faced by street children and young people. In addition, it sought to complement and inform development practice, and add to the repertoire of approaches used by East African NGOs, focused upon collective empowerment and community-based initiatives for community engagement and social change.

Unravelling Themes of Inequality

According to Nicholson (2005: 38) “the questions of where knowledge is situated, what forms of knowledge are valued and how knowledge is shared, remain a major pre-occupation in the range of practices which constitute applied drama”. This was brought sharply into focus in this project as a number of cultural, personal, social and economic challenges were apparent from the outset. This was, in part, due to the intersection of gender, background, social status and education, indigenous knowledge and cultural bias brought to the project by facilitators, NGOs, street children and young people, and the perceptions we held of each other. Crucially here, the role of the UK partner facilitating the project, as a cultural outsider, was difficult to negotiate, due not least to the potential imbalance of power. This issue was combined with, and further complicated by, conducting Forum Theatre, a form of applied theatre,

in the global south with the UK partner having English as a first and only language. Importantly, it was acknowledged that despite translations in French and Kirundi (the latter being the main language at the request of the children and young people) much of the finer nuances of the cultural context and knowledge produced by the children were lost in translation. Further complications manifested in different stakeholders, through relational dynamics and how we navigated the tension, uneasiness, frustration, uncertainty, anxiety and fear that emerged. As social workers and collaborators, it was a challenge to manage and contain these dimensions in an intercultural context, with language barriers, and emotive issues that required continuous critical self-reflection and sensitive responses.

It is important to establish at the outset that these children and young people did not know each other prior to the project and that whilst they shared issues of poverty, hunger and labouring on the streets and garbage dumps, they were not a homogenous group. In short, they shared the same universal needs (for example, food, water, shelter and warmth) but also had unique needs, experiences, expectations and aspirations for their futures, all of which emerged in and through the games, exercises and group reflections. Engagement in image theatre and sculpting (Boal 2002) in pairs and groups, created broader group discussion and exploration around themes of physical and sexual violence, oppression and repression, family conflict, rejection, lack of food, and life on the garbage dumps. These issues intersected with characteristics such as gender, age and disability. This section will consider two examples which illustrate the multiple ways in which participants experienced inequalities in their day-to-day lives as they developed their performance and how Boal’s (2002; 2008) methodology empowered participants to create and re-create these in powerful ways.

The first example stems from the exercises focused upon collaborative storytelling. Participants, in small groups, take turns to share a real event (usually humorous), the group select one of these events and take turns to tell the same story to the audience, the audience have to decide whose story it is, based on how convincing the storyteller is. It was interesting to note that the themes emerging from the children’s stories focused upon experiences of violence and abuse meted out by ‘chiefs’ at the garbage dumps. These stories illustrated

the underlying power dynamics, social status and hierarchical structure operating at the dumps by male 'chiefs'. The male dominated social structure determined access to limited resources and spaces, and the punishment, beatings and marking of the body were the consequences of breaking rules (stealing or entering spaces designated for others). However, despite the serious nature of the stories, the children conveyed these in a humorous manner causing much hilarity across the group. As such, humour acted as a mediator or bridge across the language divide and the uncomfortable and serious nature of the discussions.

The second example, taken from the exercise involving scene improvisation, linked to issues around food security. The improvisations, in pairs and groups, consisted of participants drawing upon a time they had experienced oppression, identifying a place and the key characters then improvising a short scene for the wider group. The scenarios illuminated how they were made to feel inferior, humiliated, and oppressed. For example, they demonstrated the level and type of physical and sexual violence and abuse experienced at the hands of the male garbage collectors. The group discussion about the scenarios highlighted how boys were able to use money as a bargaining tool to gain access to the garbage trucks first. In contrast, the girls were forced to sell their bodies, as a form of currency, to gain access. It was clear this not only constrained girl's access to vital resources, but that it was also not an infrequent fear for them, alongside the concerns regarding health repercussions such as diseases (HIV and AIDs) and pregnancy. The use of image theatre, improvisations, and storytelling provided these children and young people with a voice to raise issues of central importance to them, in a safe and empowering manner, through participatory theatre. The themes of sexual and physical violence, alongside hunger and scavenging through garbage, became the most powerful themes emerging from the workshops and played out in the performance 'Where is my sweet potato'.

Transformative Experiences: Creating Personal Growth and Developing Collective Consciousness

Boal's (2008) work 'Theatre of the Oppressed' was influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1921-1997). A key concept emerging from

the work of Freire is 'conscientization' (Freire, 2000). According to Donaldo Macedo (2000: 12), Freire's model proposes that "men and women develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process of transformation". The following section will elaborate upon how participants contested some of their oppressive lived experience as part of the project journey beginning prior to, and continuing during, the workshops, and onwards to the development and performance of the Forum and their action in Burundian society after the project. Drawing upon and interweaving Boal's (1992; 2002) five categories of games and exercises (physical movement, emotions, senses, memory and imagination) during the project provided a culturally sensitive and participatory methodology. Arguably, threading these five categories in a fluid and dynamic way assisted in challenging the asymmetric power relationships and communication barriers experienced between facilitators and participants in general, and in-country partners, participants and the lead UK partner in particular.

There was ambivalence and apprehension, for participants, about what they were doing, combined with concern and anxiety about not labouring on the garbage dumps and what this would mean. Essentially, these children were the main providers for their siblings and, for some, parents and relatives within their communities. This created a paradox. Participation would benefit them as individuals, in terms of access to food and an educational experience, but, in turn, would result in a lack of food and hunger for others. The compromise reached through discussion via the mentors saw each participant receiving rice and beans to take home every day for their families. This meant they did not have to return to the garbage dump after the event and they still provided for their dependants. This example not only illuminates the social consciousness amongst the participants but also emphasises community, as they negotiated their participation in the project.

It is noteworthy that the cross-cutting factors such as age, gender, power dynamics and status, played out in multiple ways throughout the project. The key focus here is gender, although we recognise it is complexly interwoven with other factors. As

previously highlighted, a key priority underpinning the project was the sustainable development goal 'gender equality'. Twikirize (2014a), in an East African context, argues that a gender perspective is crucial, both in terms of gender equality and inequality, if we are to engage meaningfully in addressing and achieving social development goals. For example, at the start of the project activities the older males were more likely to step up to talk, lead and respond to the facilitators. However, there were opportunities, through workshop exercises, to contest some of the inequalities and socio-culturally constructed roles and norms that emerged. In order to mitigate these and challenge the unequal gendered power relationships that played out in the project, leadership responsibilities and positions of authority were shared between male and female mentors. In addition, younger children (male and female) were given the opportunity to demonstrate activities, showcase their work, and receive praise, encouragement and recognition from the wider group. This had multiple benefits. For instance, equal participation by female mentors in leading the whole group warm-up set the relational tone for the day, it accorded that person respect from the wider group, and challenged, in some small way, gendered inequalities. In essence, we observed that the tension and complexities evident in the knowledge produced also played out in the production of that knowledge, in this case, demonstrated in the unequal relationships which waxed and waned throughout the project.

It should be added that issues around power dynamics, tension and animosity played out across relationships between male participants, as some of the male mentors vied for dominance in the group and critical encounters took place. Crucial here is how these tensions subsided with the balance of workshop activities, eating together and having opportunities to relax and play together during breaks. What is more important is that humour and fun played significant roles in resolving issues of conflict. Facilitators observed changing group dynamics as participants began to see merit in each other's ideas, strengths and skills. It is important to emphasise that the way in which Forum Theatre was used, and the style of facilitation by the project leads, enabled mutual respect, trust and friendships to develop which extended beyond each day. Through dramatic practice the children were able to find points of identification with other group members,

which they acknowledged had strengthened relationships and would positively influence their future encounters on the garbage dump sites.

As the project progressed, it was possible to witness the shift in the group dynamics and a concomitant growth in self-esteem and self-worth across individual participants. Importantly, this brought with it a growing awareness and sensitivity of the reality of their everyday lived experience, a need to express it, and a desire to change it. The articulation of this started as a whisper, grew louder and cascaded around the room with each session. This speaks to the idea of theatre as a tool for activism and education and is reflected, for instance, in each participant's growth in critical self-awareness or what Freire (2000: 29) refers to as 'selfhood'. We would argue that this awareness, or Freire's critical consciousness, was always present, to a greater or lesser extent. However, we assert that this methodology had a profound influence upon their ability to give voice to it in a safe space and provided them, and us, with new insights.

This project and methodology assisted in developing a sense of camaraderie and, in turn, solidarity, particularly amongst the mentors. Freire's (2000) idea of 'conscientization', achieved through a process of reflection and action, is brought to mind. This became increasingly evident, and articulated by them, during the reflective sessions at the end of each day. Broadly speaking, this approach created a space for hitherto silent voices. Herein, we observed children confidently expressing and rallying each other not only in the desire for change in their circumstances, but providing ideas for action and solutions, to negate the limitations imposed upon them, in an attempt to subvert their existing lived realities. For instance, they placed value on interactive theatre as a tool to alter their future, as a set of skills to be used as a financial resource, but also a creative medium for activism within their wider community. Yet it is essential to note, they also acknowledged its limitations, they highlighted the need to develop vocational skills to grow capacity and secure a sustainable future away from the garbage dump. Fundamentally, these children focused upon building human capability and fighting injustice, and did so by facilitating co-operation. This was particularly evident in the Forum Theatre piece and engagement of the community-based audience in identifying solutions to the problems posed in the performance.

The process of Boal's (2002; 2008) Forum Theatre methodology assisted in the development of personal growth and direct social action, by mentors, in multiple ways following the project. The following three examples will bring the point home. First, a Forum Theatre group called 'EJO NIHEZA' (Tomorrow there is hope/life) has been established by the mentors. These mentors are now striving to drive change, using participatory theatre as a method to raise awareness of teenage pregnancy, the Ebola crisis and conflict prevention linked to elections across their communities and in schools. Second, mentors have established six clubs in Burundi using this pedagogy with children and young people in their neighbourhoods. They are supporting each other in the formation of clubs working together to, in Porter's (2013: 2) words; "instigate transformations with positive development outcomes" across communities. Third, mentors have developed income-generating activities that have enabled them to influence not only their own lives but also others; the first emerges from the toolkit resource based on the GCRF Forum Theatre journey, which they are using to inform development practice in partnership with NGOs and other agencies to change lives in their own communities. The second, to combat poverty and vulnerability and remove themselves from the garbage, these children and young people are cultivating a field of vegetables with support from the NGO Social Action for Development. Fundamentally, these examples, led by participants, illustrate how they have exercised agency and mobilised themselves to engage in collective action that challenges inequality and fights oppression and injustice through a form of creative activism – Forum Theatre.

CONCLUSION

Forum Theatre is internationally recognised, and, arguably, a culturally relevant methodological mechanism for participatory education, activism and community work in social settings. In this project, Boal's pedagogy provided a vehicle for delivering anti-oppressive and empowering workshop activities that privileged the voices and experiences of a group of street children in Burundi. In so doing, it enabled facilitators to transcend some of the communication barriers by providing an embodied and sensory language,

which engaged children in thinking critically about local realities and complexities. It also exposed and problematized the inequalities, violence and oppression that emerged, and created a space to enable personal growth and, in turn, a rehearsal for social change through dialogical encounters with other community members. The East African collaborators on this project engage in developmental social work supporting street children by providing out-reach services, education, vocational training and medical assistance alongside other NGOs and government agencies. Forum Theatre offered mentors, non-mentors and NGOs in this project a consciousness-raising instrument, as well as a sustainable, culturally sensitive tool for connecting with hard to reach groups within their communities during, and after, the project. The extent of participant's potential and ability to promote and shape positive social change in their communities and challenge poverty, inequality, injustice and oppression, however, is yet to be fully realised. Notwithstanding this, the drive and commitment for change through activism is present and has been mobilised, in some small way, by these children and young people through engagement with Forum Theatre.

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