

Discovering a Planet of Inclusion: Drama for Life-Skills in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the on-going development of a Drama for Life-Skills project in Lagos, Nigeria, which embraces aspects of applied & educational theatre practices. Using neurodevelopmental disability assessments and standards, the project creates a simultaneous balance of teaching and learning life skills in the disability community. It focuses on work currently being done with students of the Children's Development Centre Lagos, incorporating theatre practices into the daily living activities of adolescents with disabilities with the goal of gaining increased life skills. In developing their most recent production, Discovering a Planet of Inclusion, members of the Centre team up with teaching artists, therapists and community members to teach, learn, practice and incorporate life skills with theatrical performances designed for schools and community centers throughout Nigeria. Company members with disabilities (including autism, cerebral palsy, and various genetic disorders) perform with the hope of showcasing their abilities, ending stigma, and inspiring opportunities for the disability community throughout the nation. The paper will include

anecdotes and analyzation from the performance praxis, development of advocacy and vocationally-based theatre performances, and ways to incorporate disability therapies (occupational, physical, multisensory, communication) into theatrical performances. The paper also discusses the importance of inclusion in destigmatizing disability and the cognitive benefits of applied theatre within communities.

The sun stabs through the open windows of a large community center; the air is stale, humid and filled with scents of petrol, exhaust and the sweat of the 300 or so people crammed inside its doors. Outside, the Islamic *Call to Prayer* beacons from the patch of concrete being used as a makeshift mosque, while sounds of a sermon are garbled deafeningly through the amplifier of a Pentecostal church across the street. The community center is surrounded by traffic “go-slows” (traffic jams), with buses stuffed to capacity by people and goods to sell at the nearby market. Hundreds, if not thousands of drivers, honking horns or yelling out of the windows mix with the sounds of street vendors hawking their wares in a multitude of languages: English, Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa and a mix of Pidgin. Children in wheelchairs or homemade scooters tap on the car windows, begging for food or money; they are patently ignored or worse, berated. There are people everywhere. This is Lagos. This is Nigeria.

The crowd inside the community center sweats patiently as a father pontificates on the stigma of disability and lists all the things his son cannot do. Suddenly, a blur of cell phones are raised and aimed at 5 Nigerian astronauts, donned in green and white papier-mâché helmets, as they take the stage. The crowd goes wild: cheering and yelling as the astronauts begin to train using physical therapy exercises. The audience stands and sings along with the national anthem before the astronauts ready for their first countdown to blast-off. Three galaxies, dressed in black capes decked with stars, dance and parade planet-lanterns as the astronauts leave earth and discover a new planet: the Planet of Inclusion. The crowd cheers as the Nigerian flag is wedged into the sand, and screams with laughter as mysterious space creatures surprise the brave astronauts. The space creatures are familiar, dressed in colorful Nigerian *ankara* fabric but have a surplus of extra arms, legs, mouths and eyes. The astronauts are afraid at first, but show compassion to the space creatures and

soon the whole group is drumming, dancing, teaching each other to cook, paint, clean or make beads. The audience is shocked; not because of the extraterrestrial experience in front of them, but because they have not seen an astronaut with Autism Spectrum Disorder teach someone how to cook. Nor has a space creature with Down Syndrome graced the stage with such incredible dance moves while an astronaut, whose family believes she cannot speak, sings with heart and soul over the cacophony of noise surrounding the community center. The first performance of the Children's Developmental Centre's *Planet of Inclusion* ends with a standing ovation.

The response of families, teachers and advocates after the first performance is not typical in Nigeria. People with disabilities are stigmatized, feared, and often kept separate from mainstream society. The stigma of disability in Nigeria creates fear and misunderstanding due to cultural and religious beliefs of sin, witchcraft and shame. Therapist Maureen Chubamachie explains Nigerian stigma surrounding disability: "To the elite, it is biological, genetic, but to the common Nigerians, the masses, it is a curse, it is evil, it is punishment for the sins of the parents or ancestors. It is believed that they bring bad luck" (2016). In the commotion following the first performance, a mother asks, "what juju [witchcraft] have you used to cure my child?"

WHAT IS DRAMA FOR LIFE-SKILLS?

Drama for Life-Skills is an arts-based program that uses task-assessment and drama to teach and reinforce life skills while promoting advocacy, vocational training and independent living for adolescents and young adults with neurodevelopmental disabilities. It began with a focus on how to teach specific skills for living (such as cooking a meal, brushing your teeth, or asking for help), and follows Boal concepts of solidary multiplication, or "one only learns when one teaches" (Boal, 2006, p. 51). Students first learn life skills tasks structured around cognitive assessment tools; upon mastery of each task, the student then uses drama to model and teach other students the task. The company of performers with disabilities then works through the *dramatic process* to create a *theatre performance* around the set of skills being learned, and creates a drama incorporating each task. The performance of such a task-guided theatre performance is then used to teach peers, families, and communities about the abilities

of the performance company.

Drama for Life-Skills overlaps methods of teaching life skills to special needs populations, including applied and educational theatre praxis and disability arts performance, without specifically fitting into any precise category. Though the foundation of Drama for Life-Skills is heavily weighted in Boal, there are many influences from Applied Theatre and the Disability Arts Movement. It is important to acknowledge areas of resonance and divergence within each method. With this in mind, it is essential to stipulate three critical aspects of Drama for Life-Skills: neurodevelopmental disorders, a definition of life skills, and task analysis.

ASTRONAUT TRAINING: SPECIAL EDUCATION, LIFE-SKILLS, AND TASK ANALYSIS

The five brave Nigerian astronauts are members of the adolescent and adult unit at the Children's Development Centre (CDC), founded by Dr. Yinka Akindadayomi. It is one of just a handful of Nigerian institutions where children and young people with neurodevelopmental disabilities have a sense of belonging, as the Nigerian culture often shuns those with disabilities. The adult and adolescent unit of the CDC currently consists of 35 members between the ages of 16-48, all with varying degrees and spectrums of disabilities, most falling within the realm of neurodevelopmental disorders. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition* (DSM-5) groups neurodevelopmental disorders as those that "manifest early in development...characterized by developmental deficits that produce impairments of personal, social, academic or occupational functioning." Disabilities that fall into this category include but are not limited to: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Attention Deficit Disorder, genetic disorders, intellectual disabilities and motor disorders (Porter 2016). Neurodevelopmental disorders are spectrum disorders, wherein what applies to one learner, may (but usually will not) apply to another with the same diagnosis. For the purpose of this paper, the term neurodevelopmental disorders/disabilities and special needs are used interchangeably. The CDC, as one of few special education centers, has a vision focused on the creation of centers in more local government areas and other states within Nigeria. Due to the huge gaps identified in providing appropriate services to children and young

people with neurodevelopmental disabilities in Nigerian communities, the CDC also trains teachers and therapists in special education methodology and assessments (Akindayomi, 2016).

The CDC uses a life skills curriculum, in addition to a variety of physical and occupational therapies to train and teach learners at the center. Life skills evaluation is used to benchmark and determine skills needed to live inclusively, ideally independently, in mainstream society. Skills include the activities of daily living such as eating, grooming, community engagement, vocational skills, social skills, self-advocacy and communication. Life skills curriculums have proven successful in developing positive skills proficiencies for learners with neurodevelopmental disorders (Meyers, 2011; Benz & Linstrom, 2003). In order to structure educational outcomes, the CDC engages with theories of task-analysis, as defined by Szidon (2010), and Partington and Muller (2012) as the process of breaking a skill down into smaller, more manageable components. Task-analysis has been shown to effectively aid learners with neurodevelopmental disorders in acquiring life skills (Szidon, 2010; Autism Speaks, 2013). In order to track progress, guide and document the mastery of life skills through task analysis for learners with neurodevelopmental disabilities, the CDC uses the *Assessment for Functional Life Skills* created by Partington and Muller (2012).

The *Assessment for Functional Living Skills*, referred as *AFLS*, is an “assessment tool based on a criterion-referenced set of skills that can demonstrate a learner’s current functional skill repertoire and provide tracking information for the progressive development of these skills” (Partington & Muller, 2012). It was developed by psychologists and applied behavior analysts in order to efficiently document and streamline life skills development. Each learner works individually with a teacher or therapist to master these tasks using physical, imitative, and verbal prompts with the goal of independent comprehension. Task-Analysis is used to break each skill into a series of steps and behaviors tracked by the teacher/therapist. Therapists and/or teachers use task analysis checklists to breakdown and document each skill, and how they are prompted or achieved. To clarify, the *AFLS* below is an example of a task analysis of taking a bath from the *AFLS* (Partington & Muller, 2012, p. 20):

Task Analysis of Taking a Bath

Student: _____ Task Analysis Skill: _____

Objective: Able to independently take a bath

+= independent

V=verbal prompt

I=Imitative prompt

G= Gesture

PP= Partial physical prompt

FP= Full physical prompt

Step	Behavior	Date:						
1	Take pajamas to bathroom							
2	Close the drain							
3	Turn on water							
4	Adjust water to reasonable temperature							
5	Fill water to appropriate height							
6	Remove clothing							
7	Get into tub							
8	Wet entire body							
9	Pour shampoo into hand							
10	Apply shampoo to hair							
11	Rinse shampoo from hair							
12	Apply soap to washcloth							
13	Rub body with soapy washcloth							
14	Rinse soap off entire body							
15	Open drain							
16	Get out of tub							
17	Dry entire body with towel							
18	Hang up towel							
19	Put on pajamas							
20	Put dirty clothes in hamper							
SUM of Independent responses								
% Independent								

Assessment for Functional Living Skills (Partington & Muller, pg. 50, 2012)

Training teachers and therapists at the CDC in life skills curriculums, task analysis and implementing documentation and assessments through *AFLS* led to the creation of a drama intervention process: Drama for Life-Skills.

COUNTDOWN TO BLAST OFF: ASSESSMENTS AND THEORY LEAD TO DRAMA FOR LIFE-SKILLS

With great anticipation, the brave Nigerian astronauts build a space craft to support their adventure, then *countdown to blast off* into a world of the unknown. This metaphor could also be applied to the CDC's implementation of the *AFLS* curriculum with the Adult and Adolescent unit: teachers and therapists *count down* steps of a task analysis, with hopes of *blasting off* into the unknown world of independence and life skill mastery. Unfortunately, unlike the success of the astronauts, the repetition of behaviors and steps during task analysis soon proved to be frustrating for both learners and facilitators. Learners were bored, teachers were bored and instead of *blasting off*, the repetitive process of learning led to burnout. Therapists and teachers continued to slog through task analysis, documenting by using Partington & Muller's prompting guidelines with physical, imitative and verbal prompts and gestures. The burnout and the repetitive scenes of prompting students through skills development sparked the idea of incorporating drama process into the educational praxis.

Educational drama researchers and theorists have observed ways to teach through drama with special needs learners that align with Drama for Life-Skills task assessment approach. Ann Cattanach describes a drama process with special needs learners as a "tasks and skills model" (1996, p. 76) for general social skills and particular tasks. McCurrach & Darnley discuss how drama games and activities used in repetition can be used to develop a performance. They also observe that some actors with learning or neurodevelopmental disabilities "find focusing on a task much easier than others, so clear explanations, patience and repetition are always of paramount importance in tackling any game, or indeed rehearsal" (1999, p. 37). Sheratt & Peter encourage teachers to use drama with special needs students by incorporating existing knowledge and drawing upon practical skills in tasks that are directly within their experience and capabilities (2002).

To keep each task analysis fresh, we began to incorporate imagination and play into our repetitive practice. A student completing vocational task analysis of baking a cake might complete the steps alone with some prompting. Then repeat the task, guided by teachers and therapists, pretending to be on a boat with friends, or baking a cake for her sister's wedding. The idea of incorporating play and role-play into learning is critical in educational drama-in-education praxis for learners with special needs (Kempe, 1996; Cattanach, 1996; Jennings, 1990; Ramamoorthi & Nelson, 2011; Sherrat & Peter, 2002; Peter, 1995). We began to "differentiate instruction," as described by Carol Ann Tomlinson (2014), modifying the ways we taught task steps and behaviors and teaching each chore in a variety of ways. We wrote songs about each step of a task; we created dance moves for each step; we drew or took pictures of each step; we made each task into game. Ideologies of educational drama (such as the work of Heathcote, O'Neill, and Neelands) outline a variety of exercises and techniques to enhance learning through dramatic process, but for the sake of brevity, this paper will focus on theorists that specifically focus on disability and special needs. It is with the differentiated instruction—the addition of roles, games, songs, and movement—students and facilitators began enjoying the lessons more when the focus wasn't only on checking the boxes but on applying the experience to real or imagined scenarios.

Individuals began collaborating on their task analysis: once mastery of a task was completed individually, groups would form to complete the task together. Students who required additional assistance worked within their group to find success. This peer-mentoring allowed for all students to be independent of teachers and therapists (Kempe & Tissot, 2012). Additional support systems were included to allow all students access to the dramatic process including modifications, visual cues, side-coaching, prompting, group work, imitation, multisensory exercises and addition of props and costumes (Kempe, 1996; Cattanach, 1996; McCurrach & Darnley, 1999; Bailey, 2010; Sheratt & Peter, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2016; Peter, 1995; Ramamoorthi & Nelson, 2011). Each groups' task analysis performance became more complex; they began to reflect the strengths and abilities of each individual.

Eventually, for positive reinforcement, we began to take groups into the school and preschool units of the Centre to perform their task

analysis scenes. In these instances, we were able to establish our interpretation of Boal's concept of *solidary multiplication*, "each group will have to organize other small groups to which they can transmit the learning, following the notion that *one only learns when one teaches*, in the quest of the *Multiplicatory Effect*" (Boal, 2006, p. 51). A group of adolescents combined their task analysis of baking a cake; they learned a song of the steps, created a dance, a pantomime of selling and eating the cake and developed a storyline around the birthday celebration of a favored cartoon character. This scene was then performed for the school unit; post-performance, the school age children were excitedly included in the imaginary cake baking process. Each member of the adolescent group then began teaching a school child, one-on-one, the steps and behaviors in the task analysis of baking a cake, just as their teachers and therapists had done for them.

LANDING ON THE *PLANET OF INCLUSION* AND THE ON-GOING WORK IN DRAMA FOR LIFE-SKILLS

Task analysis scenes became more and more performance-based, and with the rehearsal of the dramatic interpretation of each *AFLS* task, members of the adult unit became encouraged to complete more tasks. The first opportunity to share our learning and teaching abilities with the community culminated with the creation and performance of *The Planet of Inclusion*. Educational drama theorists emphasize repetition of exercises and building performances slowly, broken into small achievable steps, to structure and reinforce skill mastery (Cattanach, 1996; McCurrach & Darnley, 1999; Bailey, 2010; Sheratt & Peter, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2016; Peter, 1995; Ramamoorthi & Nelson, 2011).

The task-based theatre performance, devised through the drama process, focuses on the talents and abilities of each individual performer (see Tomlinson, 1982; Kempe, 2010; Bailey, 2010; McCurrach & Darnley, 1999) and emphasizes "possibilities, rather than limitations" (Lipkin & Fox, 2001, p. 129). This subsequently creates a "multidisciplinary piece" (Lipkin & Fox, 2001, p. 124) served by a "rich eclecticism" (Hargraves, 2015, p. 229). The "episodic nature of the piece, and its reliance on movement, music, and constant shifts between the types of dialogue and teamwork occurring has Brechtian underpinnings, with a similar bow towards the audience" (Lipkin & Fox,

2001, p. 131). The performance is created to involve the community at large (McCurrach & Darnley, 1999; Lipkin & Fox, 2001) and with each performance and post-performance student-teaching-student experience, confidence and task mastery began to increase in all units of the CDC.

SPACE CREATURES & ASTRONAUTS: DIFFERING CONTEXTS WORKING TOGETHER

The brave Nigerian astronauts first were afraid of the space creatures because they came from *different contexts*; they looked and acted differently from them. When they began to work together, teaching each other, they realized they enjoyed many of the same things. The skills the space creatures and astronauts teach each other in the performance are indicative of Drama for Life-Skills focus on tangible tasks for vocational and independent living. An increasing number of studies are examining theatre intervention for the development of social-emotional skills for autism and neurodevelopmental disorders (Lipkin & Fox, 2015; O'Sullivan, 2016; Corbett et. al., 2010; Ramamoorthi & Nelson, 2011; Jindal-Snape & Vertraino, 2007). These studies correlate similar findings in the increased development of intangible life skills such as communication, confidence, and social interaction. Specific studies also detail enhanced social skills, such as vocational training (Ramamorrthi & Nelson, 2001), problem-solving, risk taking (O'Sullivan, 2016). The findings and theories, generated by drama intervention, are based in western perspectives; the theorists and researchers only conducting work in North America and western Europe. In these cultures, schools and programs based on theory are conducted in inclusive settings, combining mainstream students with students with disabilities, and supported by government mandated laws and special needs curriculums. Play is the instigating force for western drama in education processes (Cattanach, 1996; Kempe, 1996; Jennings, 1990), but in the Nigerian context, the tangible life skills tasks initiate the drama process and the ability to play. The context for Drama for Life-Skills differs due to stigma, non-inclusive education practices (students are isolated in special needs only schools), and underdeveloped disability laws and protections. Though skills are developed in both areas (tangible & intangible), it is the task development that teaches drama as opposed to the drama that

teaches tasks for Drama for Life-Skills.

Another set of contexts Drama for Life-Skills negotiates is between the arts-based drama process and the clinical implementation and documentation of the *AFLS*. The assessment allows structure and goalsetting to guide the drama process, and elicits the scientific data to substantiate claims of increased life skill mastery. Jindial-Snape & Verttraino recognize a number of studies in drama process for social-emotional development with special needs, but find that though most studies “add to the body of knowledge around this and the strategies that can be used, most author/s have not provided enough evidence to substantiate their claims” (2007, p. 115). Using *AFLS assessment*, Drama for Life-Skills is navigating ways to document evidence to support these claims, as well as the success and challenges for each individual participant.

A third set of contexts negotiated by Drama for Life-Skills is the drama-based process versus the culminating theatre performance. Currently, the work focuses on the process of drama as a combination of applied theatre, educational theatre and special education teaching methodology. But we are on the cusp of developing full-fledge theatre performance productions. The future work of Drama for Life-Skills will need to investigate how the drama process could lead to the creation of disability theatre, described by Johnson as “artists with disabilities who pursue an activist perspective, dismantling stereotypes, challenging stigma, and reimagining disability as a valued human condition” (2012, p. 5).

DISCOVERING A PLANET OF INCLUSION: CONCLUSIONS AND NEED FOR CONTINUED RESEARCH

In the commotion following the first community performance, a mother asks, “what juju [witchcraft] have you used to cure my child?” Teachers and therapists respond with attempts to explain how the passions and interests of each student creates the performance. They explain how her daughter is one of the best teachers in the class, an amazingly passionate performer, and how grateful they are that she shares her talents and abilities. “Ah-ah, no, my daughter has no speech,” her mother replies. Her daughter, one of the astronauts, sang proud and passionately and was the only astronaut to articulate each of the narration lines; she truly shined on stage. A teacher looks to her

student standing next to her mother, and asks her to tell her mom about how the drama was practiced. There is only silence and nodding of her head. It appears that the brave, beautiful astronaut is no longer verbal and obviously uncomfortable with the present conversation. Our work is not complete; the successful life skills demonstrated on the stage must transfer to improving the quality of everyday life.

The significance of the Drama for Life-Skills process is its contribution to establishing a basis for cross-cultural applications of the drama process with special needs outside of the western context. The nature of the work being done furthers the field by adding to the almost nonexistent dramatic work with disabilities being done in West Africa. The use of *AFLS* allows a standardized structure of tangible life-skills, the ability to track and document what works and does not work with each person, and a way to substantiate evidence for drama intervention. We are still collecting qualitative and quantitative data, receiving feedback from parents and the community, and analyzing the *AFLS* data sheets in order to gain a full understanding of the outcomes of Drama for Life-Skills interventions. Though the research is ongoing, there are some outcomes that are already becoming apparent. Life skills task mastery has risen exponentially at the CDC. The amount of teacher and therapist turnover has decreased, and staff are more engaged in lesson planning and assessments. Teachers and therapists have confessed to increased levels of excitement in planning tasks and lessons, in order to challenge students and add more scenes to the performances. The school and preschool students are forming bonds and relationships with their peer-mentors in the adult unit. Parents have expressed their pride and support for the program, some asking for the intervention performances to spread to the younger units. And perhaps most notably, adults and adolescents involved in the performances show increased signs of confidence, community and self-advocacy throughout the school and curriculum.

As Drama for Life-Skills continues to develop and the performances created from the process expand, the following questions arise, guiding the next steps of research: Once these skills are acquired, how do we break the barriers of stigma in Nigeria society to allow these skills to flourish? How do we educate and inspire the families and the communities? Nigeria has gained a passionate disability inclusive theatre company full of potential. We are creating opportunities for Nigerians with neurodevelopmental disabilities, and

as they take a bow following a performance, in the words of Augusto Boal, “The end is the beginning!” (Boal, 2006, 4)

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