

Establishing the Dignity of Disabled People through Theatre for

Development: Karol Wojtyla's Theory as Praxis

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Abstract

The World Disability Report has confirmed that approximately 25 million Nigerians are experiencing various forms of disabilities. Notably, within the African continent, out of an estimated 84 million People With Disabilities (PWDs), 29% of them can be found in Nigeria. Unfortunately, individuals with disabilities often face marginalization and neglect due to challenges they experience, both physical and mental. In Nigeria, there remains lack of widespread awareness about the importance of respecting the dignity of every human being, especially those living with disabilities. The study adopts qualitative research methodology using interviews as research instrument. Given this context, this paper aims at revealing the potential of Theatre for Development (TfD) as a means to raising awareness about the struggles faced by individuals living with various disabilities. It builds upon Karol Wojtyla's perspective, which emphasizes the necessity of recognizing individuals beyond their physical limitations to restore their inherent dignity. The paper concludes that TfD can serve as a powerful tool for educating the public on fostering mutual respect among individuals, transcending their physical and mental challenges.

Keywords: Praxis, Dignity, Disabled, Theatre, TfD.

Introduction

When the term "Theatre" is mentioned, it typically evokes thoughts

of "Entertainment" or a "venue for performances." However, good theatre extends far beyond mere entertainment or the physical structures in which it takes place, contrary to common misconceptions. It is only in recent times that the study of theatre arts has gained prominence in intellectual discussions. It's essential to recognize that the art of theatre shares a fundamental connection with all forms of learning, especially concerning humanity's capacity to inquire, marvel, and contemplate within the context of the societal milieu. This paper, in light of such reflections, endeavors to delve into the potential of theatre for development as a means to raise awareness about the challenges faced by individuals living with disabilities in Nigeria. For instance, the Equality Act (2010) and Disability Discrimination Act (1995) define a disabled person as someone with a physical or mental impairment that substantially and persistently hampers their ability to carry out daily activities (<https://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance>). Despite these adverse effects, many disabled individuals possess considerable potential to contribute to the nation's economic progress.

Disabled individuals frequently encounter a plethora of challenges, and yet it is crucial to recognize that they are as much creations of God as anyone else. Therefore, there is a pressing need to acknowledge that there is "Ability in Disability." It is evident that many people have yet to fully grasp the potential of disabled individuals and should extend them the respect accorded to all responsible human beings. Persons with disabilities are often subjected to various forms of humiliation due to their physical and mental challenges. It's important to note that many physically challenged individuals are not responsible for their ailments or predicaments.

In light of these considerations, it is imperative that we exhibit compassion and empathy towards disabled individuals. Even those who

show kindness and mercy to individuals with disabilities often do so from a charitable or religious perspective, believing that their acts will be rewarded in the afterlife. The crises and difficulties faced by people with disabilities have prompted both government and non-governmental organizations to enact laws aimed at safeguarding their interests. Unfortunately, there has been limited progress in this regard in Nigeria. For example, the enactment of the Disability Inclusion Right law stands as a crucial prerequisite for upholding the human rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities. This law is a fundamental part of the initiatives aimed at realizing the 2030 sustainable development goals. Aligned with the commitments outlined in the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development, which seeks to ensure that no one is left behind, the pledge to protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities is not just an issue of justice or benevolence but an investment in a shared humanitarian future.

The absence of humanitarian services has presented an unprecedented and formidable challenge over the years to people living with disabilities. This challenge is one of the factors that drove the United Nations to establish the Disability Inclusion Strategy in June 2019. This strategy serves as the bedrock for achieving sustainable and transformative progress in disability inclusion across all areas of the United Nations' work (<https://www.un.org/observances>). As evident from the preceding discussion, it is clear that individuals in many developing countries around the world contend with various forms of disabilities. Consequently, there is a compelling need to raise awareness and sensitize the general populace to be more conscious of and respectful toward the rights of disabled persons. These individuals possess inherent potential that should neither be trivialized nor ignored. Equally important is the message that disabled

individuals should not view themselves as inferior or diminish their self-worth in the eyes of others. Just like any other human being on this planet, persons with disabilities are entitled to respect and dignity.

Treating disabled individuals with contempt or disrespect is a deviation from the norms of a compassionate and equitable society, and it should not be tolerated. The central proposal of this paper is to advocate for the sensitization of the masses through the pedagogy of the Theatre for Development Approach (TfD). This approach is seen as the key solution to fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the challenges and potential of disabled persons, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and compassionate society.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the philosophical principles of Karol Wojtyla, particularly his theory on the absolute respect for the human person. Wojtyla's postulations emphasize the inherent and unassailable dignity of the human person, a concept that cannot be violated or taken away. According to Wojtyla (1969), the term "person" extends to all human beings, encompassing those who may not possess certain cognitive or volitional capacities. This includes individuals such as the human embryo, those with severe disabilities, the elderly with disabilities, and even those in a "persistent" or "permanent vegetative state". Wojtyla's philosophy underscores the importance of not ignoring or treating individuals with disdain based on their abilities or disabilities. This perspective aligns with the ideas of John Dewey and the Modern Humanist Movement, who advocated for the sanctity and instrumental value of the human person. These principles, encapsulated in the Humanist Manifesto of 1993, have had a global impact and influenced the works of many thinkers, including Wojtyla.

Wojtyla's view is that human dignity is not something that is earned or derived from external sources, talents, or actions. Rather, every human being possesses inherent dignity simply because of their existence. A person's worth is not contingent on any external factors; it is fundamentally rooted in the fact that they exist. This perspective underscores the profound and universal value of every human being, regardless of their circumstances or abilities. It serves as a powerful call to respect and uphold the dignity of every individual, affirming the importance of their existence. Karol Wojtyla's philosophical perspective is clear and powerful in emphasizing the fundamental importance of the being and nature of the human person. According to his postulations, it is not the activities or abilities of individuals that are of primary significance but rather the intrinsic being and nature of each person. In this view, human dignity is not contingent upon a person's actions, thinking, or cognitive capacities, but it is rooted in their very existence.

Wojtyla asserts that a person's worth is not determined by their thinking abilities or aptitude for intellectual pursuits; instead, it is defined by their essential being, which is characterized by rationality. As a result, all individuals who possess human nature are considered persons and should be recognized and respected accordingly. The current study benefits from Wojtyla's philosophy by emphasizing the need for unwavering respect for every human person, including those with disabilities. It underscores the principle that human beings have inherent dignity simply because they exist. This perspective is essential in advocating for the rights and respect of disabled individuals, as it emphasizes the intrinsic worth of all individuals, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities. In Wojtyla's framework, it is not what a person can or cannot do that matters most; it is their essential being as a rational human being that warrants respect and

recognition.

The Trajectory of Theatre for Development in the Middle-Belt Region of Nigeria

James Alachi played a prominent role in introducing Theatre Arts into the NCE (Nigeria Certificate in Education) programs at the College of Education in Katsina-Ala, Benue State. Incidentally, this college was the first to offer an NCE Theatre Arts program in Nigeria in 1980. One of the core focus areas of the program was Community Theatre, which is synonymous with Tfd. This demonstrates the pioneering efforts and impact of individuals and institutions in fostering the growth and development of Theatre for Development in Nigeria, particularly in the Benue Valley region. Alachi further highlights the important figures who have contributed to the development and leadership of Tfd programs in Nigeria. Steve Abah and Jenks Okwori assumed leadership roles in advancing the program following the work initiated by Micheal Etherton. Notably, one region where Tfd has thrived as both an academic discipline and a development tool is the Benue Valley. The experiences of Tfd in Benue and Kogi States were significantly shaped by the 1977 Wasan Manoma project.

Tar Ahura emerges as another significant figure who made notable contributions to Theatre for Development (Tfd) in Nigeria. He transitioned from the Ministry of Education in Makurdi, Benue State, to join the academic staff at the College of Education in Katsina-Ala. Together with fellow staff members in Katsina-Ala, including Jonathan Okpanachi and I. Mude, Tar Ahura played a pivotal role in advancing Tfd practices in the North geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Their collaborative efforts and dedication were instrumental in successfully guiding the program at the Katsina-Ala College of Education. These individuals,

through their involvement and leadership, contributed to the growth and impact of Tfd in the region. James Alachi's commitment to the advancement of Theatre for Development (Tfd) extended to his role in developing the B.A. Theatre Arts program at Benue State University in Makurdi. Importantly, he integrated Tfd as a core component of the program's activities. Over time, Tfd has not only thrived as an academic program at the university but has also been collaboratively used by both faculty and students in the Department, as well as by international agencies such as the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and Partnership for Transforming Health Systems (PATHS), among others, as a tool for development.

It's worth noting that with the creation of Kogi State, the College of Education in Ankpa was established by the state government. The Department at the new college essentially adopted the academic programs and Tfd activities from the College of Education in Katsina-Ala. Staff members, who relocated to Ankpa, under the leadership of Jonathan Okpanachi, continued their Tfd activities. Notable among the team that transitioned from the College of Education in Ankpa to Kogi State University to continue with Tfd activities were A.D. Menegbe and W.S. Onogwu. Currently, both the College of Education in Ankpa and the Kogi State University Tfd teams have organized workshops in over 23 communities across Kogi State, making significant contributions to community development and awareness.

Pedagogy of Theatre for Development

The practice of Theatre for Development (Tfd) as a means of development communication and progress emerged in Africa following the attainment of political independence in many nations on the continent. The pedagogy of Tfd revolves around crafting messages that genuinely

reflect the reality of the people as perceived by the people themselves. This often entails an in-depth analysis of issues that lead to changes in attitudes, achieved through self-examination and situation analysis conducted by the people themselves, rather than being influenced by external persuasions or orders.

It is concerning and heartrending that some individuals living with disabilities have yet to fully grasp or analyze their own situations, which is crucial for them to recognize their inherent potentials. As Doki & Boh (2019: 42) asserts, “through Theatre for Development, people gain the capacity to share, enhance, and analyze their understanding of life and their circumstances. Subsequently, they can plan, take action, monitor progress, and evaluate issues affecting them”. Drawing from Doki's perspective, it becomes apparent that TfD is one of the strategies that can be effectively employed to raise awareness and consciousness about people living with disabilities. Furthermore, TfD can be harnessed to empower individuals with disabilities to better analyze and understand their lives and conditions, fostering a sense of courage to confront life's challenges without seeing themselves as disadvantaged or vulnerable individuals. This approach holds the potential to promote self-confidence, determination, and resilience among individuals with disabilities.

It is crucial to recognize that a significant influence on the pedagogy of Theatre for Development (TfD) was Paulo Freire, a Brazilian cultural and educational theorist and practitioner known for his emphasis on raising the consciousness and awareness of people. In his work, Doki reflects on Freire's perspective, noting that Freire (1970) believed that people, particularly those who have been oppressed and marginalized, acquire knowledge through their life experiences. However, they are often manipulated by oppressors to believe that their knowledge is insignificant

and that they themselves are ignorant. This observation resonates with the situation faced by many people living with disabilities, who are indeed often oppressed and marginalized, particularly those who lack access to education. Disabled individuals are frequently excluded from the provision of social facilities in public spaces, such as public schools that are often built without consideration for the physically challenged. This highlights the pressing need for individuals with disabilities to gain knowledge about themselves, understand their capabilities, and advocate for greater recognition and acceptance. Tfd, with its emphasis on obtaining knowledge through personal experiences, becomes a valuable tool in this regard.

Freire's (1970) educational philosophy also underscores the importance of education in enabling people to trust their own perceptions, particularly concerning critical issues. This trust should be fostered through dialogue that is centered on the people themselves. In the context of a society driven by capitalism, the questions naturally arise: How many disabled individuals in Nigerian society have access to education? Is their well-being considered in the construction of public schools and facilities? This situation further exacerbates the challenges faced by disabled individuals in many developing countries like Nigeria. Addressing these issues becomes a crucial aspect of promoting inclusivity, equality, and human dignity for all members of society, including those living with disabilities.

Theatre for Development (Tfd) is inherently people-oriented, as it encourages individuals to become aware of their own realities and to create knowledge that serves their own interests. This aligns with Paulo Freire's concept of the "Theatre of the Oppressed," a form of popular theater created and performed by the people themselves, for the people. This kind

of theatre can be a powerful tool to draw more attention to individuals with disabilities, promoting greater awareness of people's actions and attitudes toward them. This heightened awareness has the potential to alleviate the challenges faced by disabled individuals. If the strategy of Community Theatre for Development is adopted and effectively executed, it can lead to a reconsideration of inhumane treatment and attitudes towards those living with disabilities.

Lawal(2015) underscores the essence of community theatre, also known as Theatre for Development, as a practice where theatre is used to serve the disadvantaged, whether they are in rural or urban areas. Its purpose is to facilitate discussions and the development of strategies for addressing their socio-economic conditions. In the context of this discussion, the disadvantaged group includes people living with disabilities in Nigerian society, who often face neglect and indifference. Given these circumstances, this paper advocates for the use of Theatre for Development as an approach to raise consciousness among the public, ultimately addressing the critical issues that affect disabled individuals in Nigerian society. By engaging the community through theatre, it is possible to foster greater empathy, understanding, and support for those with disabilities, thereby working towards a more inclusive and compassionate society.

Indeed, it is crucial for disadvantaged individuals, including those with disabilities, to develop consciousness of oppression and to resist various forms of marginalization in their daily lives. Augusto Boal's concept of the "Theatre of the Oppressed" (1993) is specifically designed to help people learn how to resist oppression and take action in their daily existence. It is therefore the right time to consider Theatre for Development (TfD) as a powerful strategy for promoting self-expression, consciousness-

raising, awareness, personal development, and collective empowerment.

As Doki (2019) points out, Boal introduced a set of methods and guidelines to stimulate discussion and audience participation in theatre a practice he referred to as "Forum Theatre." In this approach, theatre is not seen merely as a spectacle but as a vehicle for expression that encourages critical thinking by analyzing and discussing social issues. The treatment and dehumanization of people living with disabilities are significant social problems in Nigeria that require immediate attention. Theatre for Development is proposed as a platform through which individuals can learn to explore collective solutions to social challenges. It offers them opportunities to express their views, learn effective ways of communicating difficult emotions and situations, and experiment with different behaviors and social situations. This approach enables individuals, including those living with disabilities, to gain a voice and actively participate in discussions and actions aimed at improving their circumstances and challenging societal injustices. It empowers them to advocate for change and promotes a more inclusive and compassionate society.

Overview on the Plight of Disabilities

It is undeniably true that people living with disabilities in Nigeria often face stigmatization and are frequently overlooked in the country's social, economic, and political affairs. Many of Nigeria's social institutions have failed to implement comprehensive programs designed to enhance the quality of life for individuals with disabilities. Joseph Abiodun Balogun aptly describes the plight of these individuals as "visible but invisible people," a statement that reflects the empathy for the marginalized and the recognition of their seemingly overlooked and excluded status in Nigeria's societal framework.

Balogun's observation highlights the fact that these individuals are often treated as though they are mere living mortals without due recognition and dignity. Even in situations where some recognition is extended to them along with minimal assistance, the providers of such assistance might expect excessive gratitude, as if disabled people are not entitled, by their own right, to a better quality of life. This situation is indeed disheartening and calls for corrective measures. Therefore, there is an urgent need for greater information and awareness campaigns to sensitize the masses to the fact that we are all human beings with equal rights and should be accorded equal respect. Promoting a more inclusive and compassionate society, where individuals with disabilities are treated with dignity and granted the same rights and opportunities as others, is a shared responsibility that requires concerted efforts from all members of society. It is a fundamental principle of human rights and social justice.

Living with a disability can be an exceptionally challenging experience, especially in developing countries like Nigeria. Employment opportunities often prove elusive for individuals with disabilities, and they encounter numerous barriers to securing work. As reported by Onajobi (2023), the story of Enoch Chilombo, an orphan from Malawi with mobility impairment, sheds light on the difficulties faced by individuals with disabilities. Chilombo's life was marked by early tragedy, as he lost his parents at a young age, leaving him to rely on the support of extended family members. Despite his disability, he was determined to overcome obstacles and make the most of his life. Chilombo pursued education with the hope of gaining employment to support himself after graduating. He successfully obtained a Bachelor's degree in music, a testament to his dedication and resilience. However, despite his qualifications and determination, Chilombo faced significant challenges in securing

employment.

Many employers hesitated to hire him due to his disability, presuming that he would be unable to perform specific tasks. This discriminatory treatment and stigmatization persisted, leaving Chilombo feeling isolated and frustrated. He experienced this discrimination because he was not given the opportunity to showcase his potential, despite his disability. Chilombo's story serves as a powerful reminder of the barriers faced by individuals with disabilities in accessing education and employment opportunities. It underscores the importance of creating a more inclusive and equitable society that recognizes and harnesses the talents and capabilities of all its members, regardless of their physical or mental challenges.

The experiences of individuals like Chilombo and AkpaJemilu shed light on the pervasive issue of discrimination against people with disabilities in many African countries, including Nigeria. It is disheartening to see that employers often overlook the abilities and potential of disabled individuals and instead focus on their physical appearance. This prejudice and bias, often rooted in societal stereotypes, hinder the employment prospects of disabled persons. However, Chilombo's and Akpa's stories also emphasize the undeniable fact that there is indeed "ability in disability." People with disabilities possess unique skills, talents, and capabilities that can contribute significantly to the workforce and society at large. This underscores the pressing need for awareness campaigns aimed at changing societal attitudes and perceptions, with Theatre for Development (TfD) being a valuable tool for this purpose.

AkpaJemilu's personal experience in the education system underscores the lack of accessibility and consideration for physically challenged individuals in many aspects of life, including architecture and

infrastructure. His journey, marked by challenges and discrimination, highlights the importance of addressing these issues at all levels of education, from primary to tertiary institutions. Akpa's (2023) perspective on respect is also valuable. He emphasizes the significance of disabled individuals taking the initiative to showcase their potential and communicate their aspirations to others. Building self-confidence is crucial for countering disrespect and discrimination. Akpa's recognition that disability can encompass both physical and inner or mental aspects underscores the complexity of these challenges and the importance of fostering resilience and determination among disabled individuals.

In summation, Chilombo's and Akpa's (2023) stories serve as a compelling call to action for greater inclusivity, respect, and equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Raising awareness, changing attitudes, and advocating for accessibility and fairness in all areas of life are essential steps in creating a more equitable and compassionate society. Akpa's perspective on the issue of stereotyping and prejudice against individuals with disabilities is both insightful and important. Stereotyping is a common and harmful practice that often leads people to make snap judgments based on a person's physical appearance or disability, rather than evaluating their competence and abilities. Akpa's experience, where he mentioned his ability to handle a microphone as a Master of Ceremony (M.C), but is seldom given the opportunity to showcase his talent, is a clear example of how stereotyping can limit opportunities for disabled individuals. These preconceived notions and biases can result in missed chances for disabled individuals to contribute their skills and talents to various fields, including public speaking and event hosting.

Akpa's (2023) message is clear and significant: people should refrain from judging individuals with disabilities based solely on their

physical appearance. Instead, they should take the time to evaluate their competence, skills, and potential. Recognizing the diverse capabilities of disabled individuals and providing them with opportunities to demonstrate their talents is essential for creating a more inclusive and equitable society. It is a call for the elimination of stereotypes and the promotion of equal opportunities for all, regardless of their physical or mental challenges. Akpa's (2023) advice to the Nigerian government regarding the issue of accessibility is both pragmatic and compassionate. He rightly points out that accessibility should be a general concern for the government because the potential for disability is universal. Anyone, regardless of their current physical condition, can find themselves with a disability due to unforeseen circumstances, such as accidents, which are unfortunately common on Nigerian roads.

Akpa's (2023) message serves as a reminder that while no one wishes for accidents or disabilities, they can happen to anyone at any time. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the government and non-governmental organizations to proactively address these concerns by implementing accessibility measures and facilities. By doing so, they can ensure that individuals living with disabilities have equal opportunities, independence, and the ability to participate fully in society. Creating accessible environments not only benefits individuals with disabilities but also enhances the overall inclusivity and quality of life for everyone. It is a call for foresight and social responsibility to make the nation more accommodating and supportive of all its citizens, regardless of their physical abilities.

Summary and Conclusion

This study promotes the concept of respect for disabled individuals through the pedagogy of Theatre for Development (TfD). By using this

approach, the study aims to raise awareness and understanding among those who may be unaware of the importance of respecting and recognizing the dignity of disabled persons. The central message is that people living with disabilities are, first and foremost, human beings who possess inherent worth simply by existing. This study makes a strong and poignant conclusion: that discrimination against individuals with disabilities is not only unjust but also constitutes a violation of the principles of nature and humanity. Such discrimination is deemed a crime and should be eliminated from a rational and compassionate society. The study underscores the importance of creating a more inclusive and respectful environment for all individuals, regardless of their physical or mental abilities, as a fundamental ethical and moral imperative. As such, there is need to grow more awareness and respect for disabled people through theatre for development using Wojtyla's principles.

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