



## Research Article

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## Abilities in Inabilities: Improving Social Behaviors of Autistic Children in Nigeria through Theatre Education

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**Abstract:** Theatre education has continued to play a vital role in the development of children through the use of performances, not only as an activity for entertainment but for the physical, psychological, moral and social well-being of children. And since there is a gap in communication skill between an autistic child and a normal child, this research sets to provide evidences to buttress its claim that drama can be used to improve the abilities of the autistic children for positive utility. Drama as a seen action registers easily in the minds of children and its endogenous processes is applied to enable the autistic children contribute to self-improvement and development. This work will establish some theatre techniques that can be used to improve the communication and expression of the autistic, gifted and talented children in Nigeria. To achieve the above, this work used the secondary sources of data collection and concludes that theatre can improve on the inabilities of the autistic children.

**Keywords:** Theatre Education, Social Behaviours, Autism, Nigeria.

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## INTRODUCTION

'Learning by doing' and 'doing by seeing' have informed the belief that drama plays invaluable roles in the development of children. This is because the effect of what a child does physically is more impactful than what the child is being told by way of teaching. Unlike the television where the eyes and consciousness of a child is focused in the angle of the television with the danger of continuously stirring at the television to the eyes and neck depending on the position of the child and knowledge of what is good and that which is harmful, drama in its space (stage or classroom) moves both the mind and body; recognize faces, understand different perspectives, and regulate anxiety. Social behaviours are complex; therefore, interventions developed to address the challenging needs of children with autism must target a broad array of behaviours such as verbal and nonverbal communication, emotional expressions and others to provide promising platforms for development (Corbett *et al.*, 42).

The environment of the drama, scenery, costumes, makeups and props have effect on the audience and how the performers interpret their roles using facial expressions, gestures, vocal modulations, direct communication to the audience as well as rhetoric questions that are often directed and answered by the audience have ultimate 'purgation of emotions' by the audience. As explained by Jean Claude, theatre is not electronic. Unlike movies and television, it requires the live presence of both audience and actors in a single space at a particular time in the traditional form. This is

theatre's uniquely important advantage and its religious function is felt, (ix) this experience of presence communicates to the audience more closely in watching a performance. No matter how closely a film follows the story of a play, no matter how involved we are with the people on the screen, we are always in the presence of an image, and never a person (H.C Anaodo 12). Walker Kerr explains this feeling in clearer terms that,

It doesn't just mean that we are in the personal presence of performer, it means that the performer is in our presence, conscious of us, speaking to us, working for and with until a circuit that is not mechanical becomes established between us, a circuit that is fluid, unpredictable, ever changing in its impulses, cracking and intimate. Our presence and the way we respond, flows back to the performer and alters what he does, to some degree and sometimes surprisingly so every single night. We are contenders, making the play and the evening and emotion play together. We are playmates, building the structure (Anaodo 10).

Children see actors who try to engage them from the stage by rhetoric questions, line delivery, gestures and body languages as playmates so these make them free and more accommodating. For example, a child in the theatre who is purged emotionally by a particular action or line by an actor can react unconsciously not minding the 'who' that is present. This is capable of opening up the inept part of an autistic child hence; the transformation process with the ability to communicate freely when moved by an impulse

produced by a conscious act of performance. Just like classroom drama which enables children develop friendly attitudes, relationships and attachments to adults, places and certain professions (Akas 95); theatre does so professionally using appropriate elements. Although the classroom play helps in enhancing their familiarity and relationship with each other within and outside the classroom but the seriousness and aim of using drama to transform and develop a child may be defeated. In theatre space, the imaginative or fourth wall though may be broken but the consciousness of that gap and different world must be felt by the audience as well as the actor on stage. Drama has remained a way of inculcating morals, social and cultural values on children for it has moved beyond dramatic action, rendering of lines and aesthetic creation to a serious educative tool aimed at sensitizing children on ills of the society and the aftermath. (96) As Gestalt Luckacs in explaining the cognitive development infers that children demonstrate their cognitive skills in many ways and by so doing explores the wealth of information accumulated and this helps the way their thinking develops beyond infancy (24). All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate; play is biological, psychological and a social necessity and is fundamental to the health development and wellbeing of individual and communities (Cleave 3). And since the aforementioned human components make the autistic children different from others hence; the need to create a means of transformation informed the basis for this research using children's theatre in education to achieve a more comfortable condition for children with autism

Generally, education in its traditional way of teaching has tried but cannot conquer by itself the development and improvement of special case children with emphasis to children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or autistic children as they are rightly called in Nigeria. Autism is a neurological disorder usually noticed in early childhood, characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviours, speech and nonverbal communication (USNLM). It is a developmental disorder that impairs the ability to communicate and interact. This ASD may be classified in different core symptoms, social skills deficit; attention deficit hyperactive disorder and the presence of repetitive behaviors and/or restricted interests (Frye 23). Frye maintains that, a review of the history of autism demonstrates that a deficit in social interaction has been the defining feature. Abnormalities identified in early social skill development are discussed as associated with the social function deficits (27). It is the purpose of this study to explore the social skills/communication deficit and the use drama as a tool for improved communication of the autistic children. In teaching as observed by scholars, some children are more gifted, intelligent and talented more than others but Sigmund Freud argued the possibility of using teaching (the traditional form) to ascertain the gifted or the talented child as this can also be applied in determining the improvement level of an

autistic child. Emeka Nwabueze agrees that, teaching alone is almost impossible to educate an African child. Teaching, like psychoanalysis, must deal not so much with lack of knowledge; the teacher, like the analyst must learn not to exchange knowledge with students but to "use" his or her knowledge to help students discover or rediscover their own (34). He therefore introduces Creative Dramatics as an "important illocutory". This creative dramatics he maintains helps to "resuscitate and revitalize tired and jaded brains" of normal children and tries to explore the inner minds of the autistic children in order to identify their abilities in the midst of inabilities (Nwabueze 41). An alternative to this has been taught.

From the foregoing, it is established that children differ in various aspects and that the autistic child may have a gift or talent that is hidden and probably waiting for an intrigue that can be initiated by drama. This is usually about what is seen somewhere by someone that is presented before an audience and creates adequate opportunities for activities which helps students internalize what has been experienced in the theatre or in a classroom as the case may be. Therefore, if a performance can reactivate a student's mood or change person's mood from sober to jubilation, then we assume that the autistic child has in one way or the other been in the aforementioned moods as long as no one can recall and this is where drama can explore the abilities in the inabilities of special case children.

For proper understanding, drama is an imitation by human beings on stage before an audience while theatre refers to the place of seeing and the essence is to entertain and educate. People view drama within the framework of entertainment, suppressing the educative aspects that bring about positive change in the society. It is the embracing art of presentation that encompasses the 'enactment of mimetic activity' and has potential as a democratic medium that enables the audience participate, integrate the known behaviours of the audience and communicate strongly to their minds. Entertainment is basically a part but not the ideological component of theatre and to restrict the essentials of theatre and drama as mere entertainment is quit unfortunate. Many theatre scholars as well as lovers in different societies of the world have seen the many functions of theatre which according to Louis Harrap "a form of persuasion with the power to modify, shape or awaken people's consciousness" (Menya 11). This persuasiveness of art manifests when an audience responds consciously or unconsciously to the action of a character or compelled to accept the feelings and ideas or reject what the character portrays, this is because the children audience in this context internalize the various actions that modifies their consciousness that brings about change in the existing attitudes. Nwabueze explains that,

Aristotle and Plato believe in art as a proper means of educating children, they maintain that, imitation is natural to man from childhood which is one of his advantages over lower animals and as the most imitative creature in the

world that learns first by imitation, education must be based on play and not by compulsion to grow as well educated and virtuous citizens and that is the reason Horace applauds artists for uniting information with pleasure and at the same time educating the reader, what John Dewey's theory calls 'learning by doing'(12)

That is emphasizing on the advantages of creative dramatics, stating that the primary root of all educative activity is the instructive, impulsive attitudes and activities of the child not in the presentation and application of external materials, whether through the ideas of others or their senses. The numberless spontaneous activities of children such as plays and games are capable of educational use hence, the foundation stone of educational method (Anaodo 13). The creative dramatics movement is pioneered by the American theatre educationist, Winifred Ward and other advocates of theatre-in-education have demonstrated that the art is an effective educational tool. The ideological component of theatre ranges from instruction and transmission of knowledge, values and attitude to cultural and traditional behaviours, criticism and control actions in children, youths and adults.

As rightly stated, conferences are held in different parts of the world including Nigeria with the intention of mobilizing theatre artists for social development projects. The United International Children's Emergency Fund (Menyua 5) and other nongovernmental organizations such as the ASSITEJ Nigerian conference, 2020 have been in the fore for the use of creative dramatics to disseminate messages on child transformation, improvement and development.

It is therefore the onus of this study to examine how theatre aids children to understand and transform themselves using drama as an avenue for self-realization and change of attitude but for the autistic child, it makes him or her more active and adept. Theatre early intervention can change the life of an autistic child by improving learning, communication and social skills as well as the underlying brain development. As proven by some theatre scholars, theatre-in-education is a valid and powerful force for children's improvement, transformation and actualization through the following theatre techniques. Some schools in major cities of Nigeria are exploring new ways to teach children with high-functioning autism the rules of social interactions, especially since so many of those kids are now integrated in traditional school settings. Some schools, nonprofit organizations, private speech therapists, and parents provide direct instruction on social interaction.

### **Drama Therapy**

Theatre therapy refers to the process of using theatre techniques to provide therapeutic assistance to individuals suffering different disorderliness. It is a process that encourages a client by creating opportunities

for engagement that is geared towards breaking away from irrational behaviours (James and Bakare 146). Theatre therapy uses drama, storytelling, games, dance and different kinds of performances to provide clients with improvement and transformation opportunities. The focus here is using drama therapy to achieve this improvement on autistic children.

Drama therapy as part of theatre-in-education is a tool of transformation and normalization, actualization and realization for its audience especially the autistic, gifted and talented children (Special Case Children). It is an embodied therapeutic method that incorporates role playing, dramatic projections and other creative arts modalities that invite personal and interpersonal exploration and reflection, communication development, self-awareness and expression (Therapy.com). Such drama is usually in sessions that are dependent on the set objective for the client and the improvement so far. For the autistic children, it firstly set to awaken their consciousness which helps in activating different thoughts and feelings. The experience in drama therapy enables them to interact more freely and react differently and acquiring knowledge becomes a lived experience. Projection is a key feature in drama therapy and it is a distanced approach of looking into the character, feelings, thoughts, fears, wishes and reasoning (Therapy.com).

In this therapy, children may be asked to create a story, character or say something through scene work and role playing that usually free up negative images and thoughts and opens a child to new behaviours and perception of oneself. In 1960, a theatre director known as Augusto Boal in his work on community theatre- theatre of the Oppressed imagined a theatre where audience solves directly their own problems either by watching or acting and this provided a new direction for drama therapy. Today, drama therapy helps people in a wider range to achieve change through shading of old habits, learning of new skills or accepting a difficult past (Brazier). In the United States, drama therapy is practiced in hospitals, recovery sector, remand homes and schools due to the effectiveness and positive results.

The New York University, Steinhart as cited in Y. Brazier defines drama therapy as the international use of theatre techniques to facilitate personal growth for mental and physical health, developmental disorders; it takes them step by step through creative means of finding solutions to problems. It is primarily to help clients achieve psychological, emotional and social change. It empowers people who struggle to communicate or express their needs and feelings, build confidence and provide chances to express positive self-esteem and self-worth as well as help people gain control over extreme emotions like conflict and anxieties. Unlike talk therapy, drama therapy allows participants to express themselves non-verbally and under the guise of 'play' and 'pretend.' By creating distance from real-life experiences, events,

circumstances, roles, patterns, and actions, participants have the opportunity to act in new ways, experiment with alternatives, and gain new insights(NADTA).

From the foregoing, it is possible that drama therapy can be adopted to improve children with special cases as the autistic child which this work is focused on. Aside administering the drama therapy technique by the traditional way of teaching, the administrator can equally avail them the opportunity of acting out some of the roles as this helps also in boosting their confidence and communication abilities, self-understanding and coping abilities. As aforementioned, the nonverbal communication inherent in the drama therapy approaches is specially to make communication processes accessible to children with communication impediments. These approaches include storytelling, role play, enactment, mime, masks, speech and voice production and props-these as metaphors can also help children with ASD express themselves and relate to others indirectly as well as a physical interaction with the world and its environment to get “a better sense of themselves, build relationships, express feelings and discover new ways of being” (Brazier).

The impact of drama therapy on Special Case Children cannot be overemphasized, as it employs different theatre elements to achieve therapeutic objectives and facilitate growth and changes. Combining it with different techniques, drama therapy has proven its effectiveness across all age and population in both regular and therapeutic settings. It taps into children’s natural propensity towards imagination and action in a non-threatening environment, allowing those who normally struggle with connecting to people to open up.

Drama irrespective of its type is a tool for nurturing the gifted child due to its engagement in role playing. Role playing is a teaching style that concerns the method of setting up situations in which the students are asked to improvise roles which fits into their conception of the responsibility in which they have been assigned (Nwabueze 40). It helps the child to develop practical and creative skills through the enhancement of his or her own mimetic instinct. Special case children have different understanding and interpretation of events around them which makes them unique in their own way; they believe and do what other learners or fellow students do not believe in. Some are confident in themselves, lack shyness that is obtainable in most normal children. They believe in solving their problems (not usually speaking up) if they actually perceive it to be a problem. Nwabueze opines that, talented and gifted children have their way of understanding and maintains that, giving them special attention is an apt way of improving their intellect and communication skills especially in Africa where teaching is devoid of appropriate innovative activities (43).

## CONCLUSION

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It is therefore no longer an argument that children’s theatre can be educational and entertaining at the same time. Children can learn about social and ethical issues and develop social skills through drama participation by watching or taking part in it. Children’s theatre education has attained a professional level in performance for children of different ages and building its catalogue in accordance with the interests and psychological makeup of a particular age group. For schoolchildren, a genre was developed in which fantasy and folklore are combined with elements of contemporary reality, plays that are based on adventure, pictures, history, revolution and comedies formed the basis of the catalogue for teenagers and these can contribute magnificently to the improvement of the autistic children, the focus for this research. Other experts have found similar benefits of drama therapy for children with autism. Researchers at the University of Kent found that children with autism could recognize more facial expressions after they participated in a drama program (Laura Mckenna). Children who participate in the Social Competence Intervention Program, another drama-based intervention, improve their ability to play cooperatively, share, speak with respect, inculcate morals, communicate while smiling, and say appropriate pleasantries(Mckenna). Children’s theatre in Nigeria can be adopted in teaching children at the early stage the cosmology and worldview using images that communicate and register easily to the brain.

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