

Agency and participation as determinants of social capital in Gombe Children's Theatre Project

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For citation:

Okam, C. L., Idebe, A.
(2020) Agency and participation as determinants of social capital in Gombe Children's Theatre Project. *Comprehensive Child Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 170–177.
DOI: 10.33910/2687-0223-2020-2-3-170-177

Received 9 August 2020;
reviewed 29 August 2020;
accepted 10 October 2020.

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Abstract. Methodological flexibility and substantive creativity are important internal dynamics that ensure the development of social capital in children's projects. They help to support cultural and sensory spaces to ensure that children participate equitably in projects. This paper aims to foreground how agency and participation, which ostensibly nurture social capital, were handled through purposeful creativity. It uses Gombe Children's Theatre Project (GCTP) as a case study. Its goal is to explore the realization of children's social capital by using Local Human Development (LHD) and Child's Rights Convention (Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989) as theoretical approaches to evaluating the project. Among other findings, the study reveals that agency and participation are determinants of social capital. The success is due to the effective conditions that provided such response to collective consolidation. In a dysfunctional social system, it is difficult to knit the confidence of different stakeholders to produce a noticeable positive outcome. However, the Children's Theatre Project has provided a participatory framework giving the stakeholders full control. The issue in question is of value for all the project participants, therefore, it is necessary to provide a freer space where the students could address the challenges typical for their schools. This lacuna is the result of limited time available to the university and school students alike.

Keywords: agency, child participation, social capital, local human development, Gombe Children's Theatre Project.

Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child made child participation central to participation discourse. The fundamental condition of this convention is the illuminative processes that communicates and renders persuasive aura in the social space of children, especially through participation. What this means is that ensuring children's participation does not only tell of the respect of children, but also helps them to achieve their dream of being useful participants in their spaces or spaces created for them. To engender this kind of participation, one must use flexible methodology and substantive creativity that could manage the apprehension of adults participating and/or leading the child in any process. This approach will allow to manage anyone who ridicules or prevents the child from participating effectively in projects. Thus, the issues of agency and participation must be taken into serious

consideration as they help children to effectively adapt to the conditions of achieving social capital (Sandu 2016).

A review of existing literature on agency places it as "an exercise of authentic choice or self-directed action" (Valentine 2011, 348). The paramount point here is that of ownership with its basic characteristic of value and respect. S. Amadasi highlights that agency is not "an individual ability, an innate feature of a specific individual"; instead, it is "an interactional fulfillment" (Amadasi 2018, 152). Futhering the views of Baraldi, Iervese (2014), Amadasi is of the opinion that agency "has to be understood and studied in its interactional fulfillment and, when it concerns children, both in the relations and interaction they have with other children and with adults (Amadasi 2018, 151–152). This gives credence to A. Giddens' question on the role of agency in upholding personal strength instinct to undertake any activity. To him, agency is not "the intention

people have in doing things but to their capability of doing more things in the first place” (Giddens 1984, 9). This is commensurate with the need of applying methodological flexibility and substantive creativity to provide effective conditions for children’s optimal participation in the social space. In tune with this thought, Amadasi states that: “Children’s interaction with other children as well as adult, represent a meaningful opportunity to reflect upon children’s agency, due to the processes of negotiation, positioning and the construction of narratives in which they are involved and through which they play by portraying a certain identity...” (Amadasi 2018, 152).

Agency is, thus, the capability of an individual to shape their own lives, and by doing so, also influence their social space. This social landscape reinforces the capability (provided) and the capacity (nurtured) image of the child as it translates the outcome of their interaction with adults as well as other children. We should know that children want to be heard, want to communicate and express themselves in ways they know and like. When this desire in children is controlled or interrupted, their agency is lost because control/interruption destroys the freedom associated with part-whole relationship.

The aim of such reconstruction is to help reconcile conflicts of interest through creating awareness of unruly behavior towards children — the conscious need to uphold personal interests of children by not necessarily limiting the rights of adults. Rather, to ensure that professional ethics is used as means of attaining perceptible harmony with the stakeholders. This creates a democratic tendency that guarantees that the movement of power is consolidated through a user-involved approach (Winter 2000).

Children are not commodities to be pushed and appropriated by professionals, they should be heard (O’Niel 2018). Children have their own opinions, they can assert their dignity, refrain from vicious attacks and make huge difference in their world through their own effort. Children sing their song and enjoy being a song of adults, too. Therefore, any professional that lacks sensory skills required to lead the child to success fails in an attempt to appropriate the space of the child for the child’s benefit. Ling and Dale state, “agency is the ability to effect event outside one’s immediate sphere of influence” (Ling, Dale 2014, 6). They note that agency is the force behind social action, and actors must be aware they possess agency and believe they can make a difference through exercising it (Ling, Dale 2014, 4–5).

To a greater extent, one can state that agency goes hand in hand with participation — direct and

active presence of those whose contributions to the social sphere we expect. Based on this, let us look at the institutionalized fundamentals of participation, starting with the reason why children should participate. Leaning on G. Lansdown’s ideas (Lansdown 2001), children, like adults, have multi-faceted lives; thus, a more effective way of encouraging children to accept responsibilities is to respect their rights. Thus, it is pertinent that they participate within school and within local communities and learn to abide by subsequent decisions. It is through learning which questions their views that children will acquire the skills and competences to develop their own thinking. Frowin Nyohi is of the view that children will develop much more effectively if their thinking and voices are restored. The reality of restoring their thinking and voices is a liberating process which calls for the effort to empower children and give them tools to analyze and to examine their society as well as to equally express their views on how to change and/or improve it (Nyohi 2002, 15–16). The point of priority in the foregoing is the necessity to participate as a prerequisite fundamental human (child) right that is worth cultivating to ensure that children humanism is not encroached. It should rather be maintained for an equitable creative action so that children could effectively function in the society. To study the foregoing, we have chosen a case study from one of the schools that participated in children’s theatre workshop conducted in September 2019 by the students of Gombe State University and selected primary schools in Gombe.

Case study: Double tragedy: A synopsis

The play opens with a girl (Hannatu) lamenting before the audience about her father who has just molested her. Then, the action takes place in a classroom. Hannatu’s teacher (Uncle Abu) notices that she has not been participating very well in class and decides to invite her to his office to find out what is wrong. She opens up to him and tells him what has happened; he sympathizes with her, and encourages her to take her studies more seriously. He also tells her to come back to his office the next day. The next day after her classes Hannatu comes to his office. Mr. Abu, despite being nice to her the previous day, is also nursing an ulterior motive of molesting her. So, when he advances to her, she shouts which attracts the attention of other staff (Mrs. Abigail). Mrs. Abigail rebukes the teacher and reports the case to the proprietor of the school. Uncle Abu gets arrested. The police find out that the girl’s father has abused her. Hannatu’s father also gets arrested. Uncle Abu and the girl’s father



Fig. 1. Children — theater actors

are found guilty. Each is sentenced to five years in prison for child abuse. In the end of the play the narrator urges children to never be afraid to speak up, no matter who is involved.

Performance

The Children's Theatre Workshop is designed as part of a second semester course by the 300-level students of Gombe State University, Department of English. It is the practical component of the course. Undergraduate students were sent to selected secondary schools in the university neighborhood to engage secondary school students in the production of different plays and performances shown to university community. Undergraduate students served as catalysts in the entire process as the secondary school students were expected to manage the workshop on their own right after the preliminary part.

The Children Theatre initiative embraced five different secondary schools. They included Joy Academy, Government Secondary School Orji, All Saints Secondary School, St. James Secondary School and Solita School. The workshop participants included students from both junior and senior secondary school. The undergraduate students worked with school students for six weeks. In the course of these weeks, the students were exposed to a participatory approach to teaching and learning. This ensured that the participating students developed the themes that they were interested in. The students created different dramatic pieces which included folk and modern dances which were performed on

the final day of the project before the university audience. The aim of the entire process was to ensure that the secondary school students were able to sharpen their artistic and creative skills as well as to enhance their social and mental capacities. The project also created an opportunity for the students to voice and act their issues confidently before the public. This meant that their active participations were crucial from the start to the finish (Baker 2000).

For each school, the following stages were adopted for the children's theatre: Preliminaries, Rehearsals, Performance and Post-Performance Stages. At the Preliminaries stage, the undergraduate students together with the course lecturer visited the selected schools to request their participation and to discuss the project with the school management. The project team explained the aim of the project and the modes of school students' participation. The schedules of the secondary school students were considered for rehearsals. At this stage, the undergraduate students engaged the secondary school students in friendly conversations to build a good relationship that could aid smooth progress in generating the theme of the project and designing the method of rendition. The next stage was to begin rehearsals with different schools as scheduled. The school students were encouraged to share their views and understanding of theatre and drama. Most of them seemed to have an idea of what drama and theatre are all about. However, the undergraduate students also shed more light on these concepts and instructed the school students of what was expected of them at rehearsals. The students also expressed their concerns

regarding the constraints that they could face. For example, getting some of the props for a successful production. They were told that those issues would be sorted out by the school management. The students were divided into different groups based on their interests. Some of the students featured in a folk dance, some opted for modern dances while others preferred a drama performance. With regards to the drama performance, several students (at least three students from each of the schools) came up with storylines that centered on protecting child rights. Through a majority decision of the participating students, each school adopted a particular story that they had a greater interest in. Once the plot was chosen, they went on to choose the roles they wanted to act.

The secondary school students were highly enthusiastic during the rehearsals and demonstrated impressive dramatic talent. The undergraduate students taught them some voice and body exercises which they practiced together at every rehearsal. However, towards the final stages of the rehearsals, the voice and the body training were taken over by the school students. This again showed how rewarding the process was for the students. Virtually all the students casted for each role made the best of their roles and there was no or little change during the rehearsals. Right from the moment the story was given by one of the secondary students, it received

a unanimous acceptance as the students felt it covered two major areas were children face child abuse — the school and the home. In some schools, especially during the breaks, other students could watch their schoolmates rehearsing. This also generated more enthusiasm and excitement from other students in the school. Outside the drama rehearsals, the students rehearsed different folk songs and dances, while others featured in modern dance. The commitment, cooperation and creative ingenuity displayed by the students were quite impressive.

Having finished the rehearsals, the students were ready to show their production. The performance took place on 9 September, 2019. Each school had about 45 minutes to make their presentation. Apart from the participating students, many other students came along. The performances attracted a huge audience of children who wished to relish the experience of their schoolmates. Beside the secondary school students, the audience was also made up of members of the university community (staff and students). Each performance of each school demonstrated how conscious the children were as it regarded their rights and abuse of their rights. They acted the stories they had created with confidence and passion. The creative expressions of the students made the audience connect with the actors, which ensured the effective delivery of



Fig. 2. Theatrical performance

the students' message. They also performed dances that conveyed the themes of child rights and abuses. It is worth mentioning that for Government Day Secondary School Orji one of the students went to the studio to create a song which the students later performed together on stage. After the performance, the secondary school students discussed the learnings and the impact they gained from the performances. They gave a lot of feedback and many of them did appreciate the experience. Some of the students suggested that their schools should organize drama clubs so that they could further develop their theatrical talent and skills. The coordinating lecturer assured them that their proposal would be considered by the school management which made the students excited.

The project was quite successful as a number of the secondary school students expressed their gratitude for the possibility to voice their concern about important social issues. They also demonstrated that beyond entertainment, they appreciate the opportunities which theatre affords them to showcase their creativity. Many of the students seem to have already found a pathway in their carrier development as they wish to further develop their skills in acting, dancing and organizing performances as a whole.

Local human development framework

Human development is a well-conceived strategy and framework that helps to deal with the dynamic ways human wellbeing is understood, improved and maintained. It provides an overall index by looking at capabilities and approaches that engender equity. It provides an easy access to data and indicators upon which equality, equity, participation, agency and other related factors are actualized and, as such, it helps measure those things that deter actual human social growth. According to Y. Jubeto, U. Villalba, and L. Guridi (Jubeto, Villalba, Guridi 2014) Local Human Development (LHD), "(i) seeks to promote both individual and collective capabilities (ii) has as its normative reference the social and collective dimensions of justice and wellbeing (iii) focuses on local communities, not as static units to be transformed from above, but rather as fluid entities which can experience human development originating from below" (Jubeto, Villalba, Guridi 2014, 229).

From the foregoing, we believe that LHD and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are reality-oriented concepts that explain and provide succinct systemic guidelines to view how their indicators ensure social capital (Fundamentals of Social Capital 2000).

As we have mentioned earlier, the flexibility of tools may contribute to the development of social capital through the implementation of children's right to participation. Theatre creates a relational space whereby the learners and those impacting the learning or stakeholders directly share and comment on their realities (Okam 2019a, 38). Okam puts it more succinctly when she notes that: "This transformation from theory to method seems to have produced an insistent belief that there are correct or incorrect ways in which to engage children in emancipatory discourse... Emancipatory Discourse between educators and students is not just important, it is imperative. It is necessary that we step aside and allow youth the space and power to create what they need to create, even if we do not necessarily understand their processes... children's agency is consistently disproving this idea that children have no or limited agency. The fact that the construction and reconstruction of a fair society occur when democratic situation, collectives cannot be overlooked in the discourse of cutting barriers of development" (Okam 2019b, 91).

Children should be given a chance to air out their views; as S. Cioban (Cioban 2018) posits "liberation and emancipation perspective give greater value to children's ability to choose what is right in their interest, claiming that society should grant them the right to participation" (Okam 2019b, 80). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989) gives provisions that challenge the way children are treated, neglected, and exploited. In contrast, it offers distinct set of rights and, as a consequence, children's rights are supposed to be protected similarly to human rights. The child is empowered to involve in self-actualization — a cause described as social capital. Social capital is a concept which conglomerates economic, political and social context of human development. According to Putnam (Putnam 1993), quoted in Ling and Dale, social capital are "those features of social organization such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Ling, Dale 2014, 6). Social capital "involves formal and informal social networks among individuals who share norms and values, especially the norm of reciprocity (mutual assistance). Two types of social capital are distinguished: localized social capital found among people who live in the same or adjacent communities; and bridging capital, which extends to individuals and organizations that are more removed" (Wallis 1998, 321).

It means that social capital asks the question concerning the possibility of appreciating universality with high objective orientation, instills the

spirit of complementarity and social orientation which encourages depersonalization or distinctiveness in collectivity. Social capital is “the mutual relations, interactions, and networks that emerge among human groups, as well as the level of trust (seen as the outcome of obligations and norms which adhere to the social structure) found within a particular group or community” (Wall, Ferrazzi, Schryer 1998, 300–322). There is an implicit understanding that social capital will be useful for enhancing some other aspects of life such as learning, social mobility, economic growth, political prominence, and community wellbeing.

Discussion

Human development is a concept that will be used to explore the level of participation and agency that determines social capital in the chosen case study. Human development:

- 1) seeks to promote both individual and collective capabilities;
- 2) has as its normative reference the social and collective dimensions of justice and wellbeing;
- 3) focuses on local communities, not as static units to be transformed from above, but rather as fluid entities which can experience human development.

In the case of promoting individual and collective capabilities, the drama production process from the preliminaries to research, performance and post-performance enabled the children to come up with the ideas. Generating the themes, a storyline or a scenario, the students enhanced their ability to understand the underlying issues. The need to tackle the problems visible in the storyline spurred their interest on how to communicate as well as to perform the action that engendered their results. What is indisputable is the fact that the methodological flexibility (Okam 2019a) and creative methodology of children’s theatre was resourceful for the formulation and exercise of their agency which is implemented through participation. Drama is what supports the participants’ free will and empowers them to share or control their activities. It also helps them to generate their themes in the way they prefer (Okam 2014, 123).

The process made it imperative for them to understand the underlying issues they have created and spurred their interest to communicate them. Meeting this condition can only be attributed to the infrastructural opportunities in terms of methodology that created the capability opportunities, a significant advantage in the form of exercised agency. This can be said about the activities ranging from the preliminaries to post-performance. The chance to participate and

inclusiveness reinforced the productive outcome of students’ performance. The individual students who carried out the project, even in the collective sense of complementarity, provided the spaces for consolidating these common goals within their jurisdictional enclave.

From the perspective of social and collective dimension of justice and wellbeing, contrary to the imposed mindset of participation that echoes intervention, the workshop maintained the core democratic and decentralized role as the students could manage all the processes independently. The project was not marked by dilemmas or marginality. Therefore, it created conditions for respect and wellbeing. Its implication for social capital is that students now have a level of social or societal organization to explore things on their own. This justifies the fact that social capital is linked to economic, political and social spheres; however, our focus is on the fact that “stable relationships among actors enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of both collective and individual action and interaction. All presuppose that social capital can be strengthened, and that the process requires resources” (Wall, Ferrazzi, Schryer 1998, 300–322). The project simply created adequate ownership capability by allowing the students to inject the themes and the form of the performance (choreography and drama) with the issues of their ultimate concern and making them liable to control, regulate and assume a role in line with their ideas. No outsider seemed to mind how the children managed the production. It created the conditions for students to exercise agency, to feel their self-worth and to manage the project.

The dilemma of participation was confounded by the mutual bond created by flexible methodology and substantive creativity enabled by this methodology. In this way, one can conclude that the rights of children were not at the crossroad between effective realization of the project and the politics of representation. The project stakeholders viewed children as members of a social group who share common interests through some form of relationship with other groups irrespective of their social background.

Conclusion

With the foregoing in mind, it is not a false claim to state that agency and participation are determinants of social capital. As mentioned in this study, several schools came together to generate themes and take part in performances on stage. However, the success is due to the effective conditions that provided such response to collective consolidation.

In a dysfunctional social system, it is difficult to knit the confidence of different stakeholders to produce a noticeable positive outcome. However, the Children's Theatre Project has provided a participatory framework giving the stakeholders full control. This is an obvious achievement in terms of didactics and management. This study has some limitations, though; it drew generalizations about the students' most pressing needs from the schools

which showed readiness to participate. The issue in question is of value for all the project participants, therefore, it is necessary to provide a freer space where the students could address the challenges typical for their schools. This lacuna is the result of limited time available to the university and school students alike. In all, the positive thing is that the participating students have been equipped with an effective tool — the theatre/drama method.

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