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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## RE-CONSTRUCTING THEATRICAL SPACE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN KENYA.

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Theatrical space is a significant element of theatre which provides opportunities for young children to explore their artistic creativity. The tendency to conceptualize theatrical space in mainstream ways which reflect only physical space and adult viewpoints runs the risk of excluding children's artistic culture. By engaging the critical lenses of postcolonial theory, this paper interrogates the construction of theatrical space in early childhood development discourses as mere physical space such as architectural structures, free outdoor space or any physical space equipped with facilities provided by adults with children on the receiving end of services. This paper posits that much more than the mere existence of physical space is needed to guarantee and expand theatrical space for young children. According to findings, the wide range and dynamism in determining theatrical space in early childhood facilitates children to artistically explore theatrical genres. Such spaces extend the boundaries of theatrical space beyond physical space. For example, artistic space, cultural space, inclusive space, democratic space and other emergent views on theatrical space, are all important aspects of children's theatrical space. Moreover, the variant forms of theatrical spaces distinguished from the findings do not exist disparately but overlap and interact to enrich children's theatrical culture.

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**Introduction:-**

This paper is informed by a study on the place of indigenous theatre in early childhood development (ECD). The study engaged children ages 3-6 and their caregivers from sampled ECD centres, in Ugenya, a rural Sub-County in Siaya County, Western Kenya. The children and caregivers were engaged through participant and non-participant observation and focus group discussion (FGD) respectively. Most of the children were from low socio-economic backgrounds and engaged with theatre mostly on their own creativity or under minimal facilitation by their caregivers. Even though a majority of the ECD centres were physically ill equipped with physical facilities such as built-up space, play grounds and play equipment, children still actively engaged in age appropriate theatrical activities leading to variant ways of determining the way theatrical space was manifest. This was an indication that much more than physical space was needed to guarantee children's engagement with theatrical activities, hence the need to deviate from conventional and prescriptive approaches to conceptualizing theatrical space in ECD.

Wilson and Goldfarb (2002) draw from classical Western concepts of theatrical space embedded in physical architectural structures with variant designs or outdoor spaces such as proscenium theatre, theatre in the round, arena, created or found space and thrust stage. These architectural structures have a designed stage for actors, auditorium for the audience and the 'fourth wall' to separate the narrator and spectator by giving aesthetic distance. According to Wilson and Goldfarb (2002), the notion of aesthetic distance assumes that the audience must in some sense be physically separated from the performers and be aware that it is a work of art intended for them to experience its aesthetic qualities. Such a perspective on theatrical space deviates from indigenous African

conceptions of theatrical space and children's artistic culture which are participatory with no dichotomy between the performer and audience.

According to findings in the study, the perception of theatrical space was not in any way limited to physical space but incorporated multiple facets of space. This paper is predicated upon the fluid concept of space such as time and opportunity as space, artistic space, inclusive space, cultural space and democratic space. To this end, aesthetic experience was integrated into the process of creativity, production, interaction, exploration and discovery. Instead of being modeled on a physical alienation effect to achieve aesthetic experiences, children were part and parcel of the action. Such a participatory role in theatre combined the role of spectator and actor, what Boal (1993) terms 'spect-actor'. Conformity to the principle of separating performers and audiences excluded indigenous theatre in Africa as well as children's ways of knowing and doing and did not grant children the democratic space for creativity, interaction, exploration and discovery.

Ngugi (1997), Chesaina and Mwangi (2003) depict theatrical space from an indigenous African perspective. They view theatrical space as part and parcel of the space of life occurring around homesteads or any other relevant community spaces where community rituals take place. Even though these perspectives diverge from fixed architectural structures as theatrical space and conform to the definition of theatre in Africa as part and parcel of life, they still connote theatrical space in the light of physical space yet the discussions around the theatrical activities described by these scholars capture the principle of cultural, democratic and inclusive space. This paper argues that there is need for scholarly works to interrogate where, when and how theatrical space is conceived and constructed and to deliberately extend the boundaries of theatrical space beyond physical space by distinguishing and highlighting them in their discourses rather than being implicit.

A right's based approach regards theatrical spaces as healthy environments, safe and secure spaces, child friendly spaces, democratic spaces, accessible spaces and inclusive spaces (Brooker and Woodhead, 2012). Even though these perspectives on theatrical spaces for children extend the boundaries of theatrical space beyond the physical and tangible, they are foregrounded within the context of how the provisioning of physical space impacts on child well-being and less on how children artistically participate, construct, create and engage with play space without the patronage and provisioning by adults.

### **Physical Space:-**

Evidence from the study shows that under-resourced ECD centres with limited infrastructure in terms of built spaces, equipment and playgrounds did not inhibit children from engaging in theatrical activities. This means that theatrical space is much more dynamic than the mainstream perceptions that limit theatrical space to physical space. Three specific types of physical spaces explored by children are evident at the sampled ECD centres: built-up space such as buildings, outdoor open space and material and play equipment in buildings or open outdoor spaces. Given that physical space is tangible and involves many stakeholders such as: parents, state and non-state actors in its design, construction and acquisition, children do not have a say in the provisioning and type of physical space at their ECD centres but construct their theatre around the existing physical spaces whether indoors or outdoors. Children re-construct theatrical space by demarcating specific areas with their bodies, objects or imagination.

A focus group discussion with caregivers revealed that most agenda during stakeholder meetings often exclude children's participation out of the assumption that adults are the experts in providing services for children who are expected to receive and experience the services in form of physical space. This paper does not in any way underrate the significance of physical space and the role of adults in making theatre happen for children through physical space but questions prescriptive and absolute standards in determining theatrical space with a view to opening up discussion for the inclusion of children's voices.

Viuru (2005) argues that the focus on materialism has led to the misinterpretation of 'learning by doing' to mean that children can only enjoy play by having physical equipment and material without leaning on the imagination which is core in theatre. This paper reiterates that privileging material resources leads to the objectification of children as if they lack agency in theatre. Moreover, it overlooks and compromises children's creativity by focusing more on objects rather than the human context of character which is the essence of theatre. Such a position has led to the privileging of toys, television, films, computer games, outdoor swings and slides as major modes of enriching children's play and creative activities. This paper does not however perceive toys, equipment and digital play

material as problematic but interrogates the privileging of these items at the expense of children's agency and creativity as artists.

Observation of children during theatrical activities in ECD centres indicated that children explored the potential of naturally occurring spaces. This observation lends legitimacy to the central thesis of this paper. The significance of outdoor space is highlighted by Hart and Woodhead (2012) who indicate that it is important to consider and recognize the value of outdoor spaces and naturally occurring spaces to enhance opportunities for creativity rather than depending entirely on specially designed spaces.

From the FGD with caregivers, it was evident that despite not being the only yardstick to determine theatrical space, physical space requires certain standards in order to be effectively explored by children. For example, size, location, cleanliness, safety and security are prerequisites in ideal spaces for children's theatrical activities. This corroborates evidence by Hart and Woodhead (2012) who posit that despite having profound impacts on children's well being and development, the physical environment is often neglected in research and policy hence the need to ensure that children's spaces are well planned, safe, healthy and secure with children in mind as actors.

According to the study findings, some ECD centres were positioned in locales with constrained, neglected and limited physical spaces such as along the road, around shops and in places that are not originally conceived and designated for the centres, hence raising the issue of safety and security, standards by government departments regarding play space. Hart and Woodhead (2012) further argue that children's play, learning and social interactions depend a lot on the accessibility and quality of places and spaces they inhabit. Therefore, it is evident from the findings that even though physical space is privileged, it is not accorded adequate resources to enhance its quality. On the other hand, this paper argues that the concept of quality should be much more inclusive than safety and security standards to include best practices in cultural values and more.

The fact that ECD centres are perceived as places for primary school preparedness lends priority to space in buildings and classrooms rather than outdoor physical space. By observing children's theatrical activities, the findings revealed that the outdoor space provided children with great opportunities for exploration, creativity, social interaction, participation, freedom and liberty to create and engage with theatrical space. The potential of space in ECD centres needs to take into consideration outdoor space not only as a place for expending excess energy, but also as space for creativity where children spend quality time, have their voices heard, realize their basic rights, practice their cultural values and physically experience their environment. In view of all of the above, the study takes cognizance of the position by Woodhead (2012) that: the kind of spaces that policy makers, parents and communities provide for young children are a reflection of their views and visions regarding children. The natural environment is a rich resource for children's activities and should not be excluded in favour of buildings and structures. Provisioning of such spaces in early childhood should also be inclusive of children with disabilities and a reflection of children's participation.

### **Created or found space:-**

Literature, (Boal, 1993; Brooker and Woodhead, 2012) reveals that created or found space could be both tangible and intangible. This is unlike Wilson and Goldfarb (2002) who depict created or found space in terms of physical spaces not specifically designed for theatre such as streets, garages, market places and other open spaces. Created or found space allowed room for the range and dynamism of theatrical spaces at the ECD centres to go beyond physical space to embrace artistic, democratic, time, imagination and culture as space. The fact that theatrical space is created, found and explored by children through their desire and willingness to perform theatrical activities is an indication that created or found space is not only limited to physically designed space as is common in mainstream discourses on theatrical space.

The findings above add voice to Boal (1993) who notes that participants in a theatre can invent space by using their bodies and objects in the environment. Children at the ECD centres were able to define, map out and explore theatrical space using their imagination, bodies and objects such as trees, chairs and buildings in their environment. For example, according to caregivers, the way home during lunch hour was turned into theatrical space which was exited randomly when one of the participants branched off to their homestead. Therefore the concept of space was experienced by creating, taking, giving, exiting and entering space at will.

### **Cultural Space:-**

This paper supports Hovik (2001) that even though children belong to a cultural space, they may not engage in theatrical activities in exactly the same way as it is established in their cultures but in a way that is peculiar and unique to them as children. From the findings, cultural space could not only be limited to culture as a way of life or historical origin. Cultural space transcends the boundaries of community practices and heritages to include: children's artistic culture and language heritages as distinct elements of cultural space. On the other hand, the existence of physical space, democratic space, artistic space and time for theatrical activities at the ECD centres did not guarantee the practice of culturally sensitive media.

Theatrical activities at the sampled ECD centres existed in the context of a mixed cultural heritage: ethno-cultural backgrounds of the children, a diverse Kenyan multicultural heritage and a Euro-American Christian heritage. For instance, like most Kenyan children, the children at the sampled ECD centres grow up exposed to at least three languages including their mother tongue Dholuo, Kiswahili which is both the national and official language in Kenya and English, which is the medium of instruction in schools and also the official language in government. Given that Kenya has over 42 ethnic communities, the caregivers indicated during FGDs, that some of the children were also exposed to other local languages apart from their own mother tongue.

A Christian heritage comprising Christian songs and biblical stories in the local language Dholuo, English and Kiswahili dominated theatrical activities at the ECD centres. It is also important to note that not all content in the local language Dholuo was indigenous as Christian songs and theatrical activities derived from biblical stories in Dholuo had overtaken the use of indigenous theatre over the years especially during facilitation by caregivers. Caregivers revealed that some of the ECD centres are sponsored by Christian faith based organizations which emphasized the need to spread Christian doctrines. Most of the children attended Sunday school and were familiar with many Christian songs. At home, most children were exposed to gospel music which was trending in family gatherings and audio-visual media alongside secular music. Biblical stories facilitate storytelling since the bible is more accessible. Almost every caregiver and family owns a bible. It is little wonder then that children's theatrical activities bore a triple cultural heritage - local, Western and Christian heritages.

English nursery rhymes and fairy tales also contributed to the *mélange* of theatrical activities by children. Caregivers said that the nursery rhymes were handed over from generations following colonialism where the history of formal ECD centres could be traced to. Furthermore, the children's literature environment is saturated with colourful English picture storybooks and English nursery rhymes. Pressure from parents for their children to learn English early because it is the medium of instruction in schools is also a contributing factor to the privileging of English nursery rhymes, songs and fairy tales.

The findings above corroborate existing research evidence (Ebrahim, 2012; Marfo et al., 2008; Ngugi, 2012; Nsamenang, 2010) which depicts Africa as having a medley of ECD heritages derived from: indigenous cultures, Islamic Arabic, Western Christian colonialism and postcolonial rights based global child images. Further, a significant number of scholarly works posit that culturally sensitive media exist in all spheres of a child's life even though dominant Euro-American discourses saturate global knowledge and are purported to be universal (Nsamenang, 2011; Ebrahim, 2012; Ngugi, 2012). The observation by Marfo et al. (2008) that not even the most remote village in Sub-Saharan Africa is immune to Euro-American notions and practices related to child development have implications for theatrical space in ECD. On the other hand, the study joins (Nsamenang, 2010; Oudenhoven and Wazir, 2006) in acknowledging that there is nothing problematic about the Euro-American or Western narrative on childcare per se except its commitment to a single world view in a world where children come from diverse cultures which all deserve recognition in global discourses.

Apart from the four heritages above highlighted by Nsamenang' (2010) this paper contends that children's artistic culture is a unique cultural entity which deserves recognition in global ECD discourses. Children at the sampled ECD centres engaged with theatre in very unique ways including spontaneous theatre, improvisation, mime, process theatre, song, dance, storytelling and role play. It was also evident that children had their own terminologies for some of their theatrical genres for example: Kalongolongo a family situation role play that often includes the part of father and mother.

### **Democratic Space:-**

In the constitution of Kenya (2010), democratic space is associated with freedom of speech, movement, association and expression. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – UNCRC (1989); article 31 bestows similar rights on children with an emphasis on children's rights to participation, cultural and artistic life. This paper argues for a more generative curriculum framework inclusive of community, family and children's voices in order to expand democratic space from the level of planning. Caregivers at the ECD centres perceived democratic space as allocating children free time to engage in activities of their choice. However, this paper posits that granting children free time on their own does not guarantee democratic space because there is need to demonstrate democratic space in balancing the curriculum. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that theatrical activities would be considered during 'free time'. Several programmed activities such as drawing, colouring, sports, moulding, singing, dancing and storytelling compete for an allocated time of only thirty minutes per day. The 'free time' therefore does not guarantee the genuine democratic space ideal for child-led theatrical innovations.

Democratic space at the ECD centres is limited by the overall formal curriculum which favours academic progress designed by the Ministry of Education (MoE). The voices of children, caregivers and community members are absent in designing the curriculum for the ECD. The ECD curriculum is an official government document that MUST be followed. Boal (1993) posits that the invention of forum theatre was a way of democratizing theatrical space as it gave the audience the forum to embody and give life to their ideas. Therefore, this paper supports the significance of democratic space as essential in giving children a platform to explore their own theatrical desires. Additionally, democratic space transcends programmed free time and should be part and parcel of the daily activity profile at the ECD centres.

### **Inclusive Space:-**

At its most basic meaning, inclusive space is the availability of space that is conducive to all ECD learners, including children with disabilities. However, this paper opines that inclusive space at the ECD centres should extend beyond giving access to children with disabilities. For example, a wide range of performance experiences guaranteed social inclusion. The participatory nature of child-led theatrical activities was significant in granting inclusive social space that does not segregate performers from audience. Secondly, most of the theatrical activities by children are process oriented and do not make demands on them to undergo auditions, rehearsals, mastery and presentation of a final product. This 'participatoriness' allows inclusive space which provides direct entry into engaged inclusion. Thirdly, impromptu and spontaneous theatre by children also provides inclusive democratic space which ensures free latitude to perform according to the devices of each participating child. All these ranges of theatrical genres and experiences create inclusive space such that newcomers to the ECD centres join and participate in theatrical performances without undue pressure for rehearsal, mastery and perfection as is often the case in professional adult theatrical productions.

The wide range and dynamism of theatrical genres practiced by children and caregivers portrayed inclusive space as a place enriched with diversity of theatrical genres, social interactions, languages and cultures. The position by Casey (2012) regarding discourses on inclusive spaces as those enhancing a sense of belonging, accessibility beyond the physical design to a range of play experiences and creativity for social inclusion are upheld in this paper as significant to inclusive space. To this end, making children benefit from a wide range of play experiences enhances the concept of inclusive space as more than just accessibility through physical design.

This paper maintains that even in the design of physical space, children need to be included. Hart (2012) and Woodhead (2012) postulate that most of the time space is designed with children in mind without their involvement. Children in this study were able to use their bodies and minds to creatively actualize theatrical spaces thus demonstrating their creative capacity to participate in providing views and opinions in designing theatrical space for themselves in collaboration with adults. It is fair to conclude then that inclusive spaces benefit all children, families and communities at large.

### **Artistic space in ECD:-**

Fronczek (2009) and Lester (2012) posit that article 31 of the UNCRC (1989) which invests in the child's right to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities and to participate in cultural and artistic life is a 'forgotten right': They further argue that these rights are only considered when other basic rights such as food, clothing, shelter, health, and hygiene have been fulfilled. This perspective opens up dialogue regarding artistic space in ECD. Like Fronczek and

Lester, this paper interrogates the hierarchical distribution and fragmentation of ECD interventions which render theatrical activities 'forgotten rights' hence the need for further research.

This paper asserts that several factors compromise artistic space in ECD. For example, the privileging of academic curricular by parents, caregivers and MoE and the general perception of ECD centres as spaces for primary school preparation. Children at the ECD centres also have to go through a written interview before transitioning to the first class of primary school. They are never assessed through their engagement with theatrical activities which are a significant part of children's daily experiences. The situation is exacerbated by pressure on caregivers by parents who expect their children to learn how to read, count and write before entering primary school. Okwany et al. (2011) cite Choi who terms this privileging of academic curricular in ECD as the 'schoolification' of ECD. Such institutionalized relegation of child initiated theatres as informal curricular leads to its marginalization which in turn limits artistic space.

The findings of this study corroborate existing research evidence (Hendy and Toon, 2001; Lester, 2012) which indicate that the focus of research and practice is often based on adult ways of knowing and doing where adult lenses are engaged to measure children's theatrical activities. Lester further argues that, children do not need adults all the time to engage in theatrical activities and that adults tend to perceive children's play and theatrical culture as something that occurs naturally and requires no effort, skill or creativity. In view of this, this paper maintains that the adult yard stick overlooks the creativity of theatrical activities by children, taking them for granted as daily routine and pastime fancy instead of also being viewed on their own artistic merit. Lester and Russel (2010) outline the dismissive ways in which adults respond to children's play. In many instances, adults regard children's play as dangerous and risky time wasting endeavours that are subversive to formal learning. This paper however, makes a concerted case for children as artistic creators and practitioners in their own right as innovative individuals whose ways of knowing and doing continuously deserve open minded investigative inquiry. At the same time, the study attaches significance to the role of adults in making theatre happen for young children hence, the inclusion of theatrical practices by children on their own and those facilitated by caregivers at the sampled ECD centres.

Perceiving theatrical activities mainly in response to developmental milestones rather than artistic merit also leads to the constraining of artistic space; a situation made worse by the disconnect between policy and practice evidenced by poor enforcement of policies on the ground. These findings corroborate evidence that research studies tend to focus on literary aesthetics rather than performance aesthetics which capture children's artistic culture (Finnegan 2005). Artistic space was manifest in genres at the disposal of children which included impromptu theatre, process theatre, participatory theatre, improvisation, mime, song, dance, poetry, rhythmic dialogue, role play and storytelling.

### **Conclusion:-**

There is need to interrogate mainstream ways of prescribing theatrical space as physical space with children only as passive recipients of services. Children constantly demonstrate their capacity to create, re-create, re-invent, manipulate, structure and re-structure theatrical space to suit their own artistic whims. Scholarly works should deliberately and consciously define theatrical space with emergent views drawn from the multiple contexts existing in childhood. The mere existence of physical space does not guarantee engagement with theatre because a lot has to be done to make theatre available, accessible, interactive, culturally sensitive, democratic and inclusive.

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