

RESEARCH ARTICLE **Section:** *Theatre & Performance Studies*

Re-Thinking Theatre in Shaping Human Rights Discourse: The Role of Applied Theatre

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Abstract

Theatre has historically functioned as a reflective and transformative medium within communities, yet its application as a tool for human rights education within carceral environments in subSaharan Africa remains underexplored. The paper investigates how forum theatre and community theatre—two key forms of applied theatre—contribute to human rights education, justice, and social inclusion within selected prisons in Accra, Ghana. Guided by critical pedagogy and performance theory, the study employs a qualitative case study approach using documentary analysis, semistructured interviews, and participant observation. Findings reveal that applied theatre creates dialogic spaces within the prison environment. These spaces enhance inmates' awareness of human rights. They also challenge prevailing narratives of justice and incarceration. Additionally, applied theatre fosters social inclusion among participants and supports the reconstruction of individual identities. Theatre emerges as a participatory, embodied pedagogy enabling incarcerated individuals to rehearse agency, renegotiate power relations, and articulate lived experiences of injustice. The study contributes to emerging scholarship on arts-based human rights education in West Africa and highlights practical implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to integrate theatre into rehabilitative and civic education frameworks.

Keywords: Applied Theatre, Human Rights Education, Forum Theatre, Community Theatre, Critical Pedagogy, Ghana, Prison Theatre, Social Inclusion.

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Introduction

Across African societies, theatre has long occupied an important role as a space for resistance, collective memory, and sociopolitical dialogue. While theatre is widely used in community development and educational initiatives, its potential as a transformative tool for human rights education within prison environments remains insufficiently theorized, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. In Ghana, correctional facilities face chronic challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate rehabilitative programming, and limited avenues for civic or human rights education (Baffoe-Bonnie, 2020). These structural issues underscore the need for innovative pedagogical approaches that foster self-expression, critical reflection, and social reintegration.

Applied theatre, particularly forum and community theatre, offers a participatory platform through which incarcerated individuals can explore notions of justice, agency, and dignity. As articulated by Augusto Boal (1979), theatre can serve as a rehearsal for liberation, enabling participants to interrogate oppression and imagine alternative futures. Prior research in Africa largely emphasises community development and public health (Mda, 1993; Plastow, 2014; Prentki & Preston, 2009), leaving a gap in understanding theatre's role within confined institutional settings. Studies in Western contexts demonstrate prison theatre's potential to challenge stereotypes and support rehabilitation (Balfour, 2004; Davey et al., 2015), yet little is known about its relevance in Ghanaian prisons.

This paper addresses this gap by exploring how applied theatre functions as a mechanism for human rights education, social inclusion, and justice within selected prisons in Accra. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: "How do forum theatre and community theatre function as tools for human rights education, justice, and social inclusion within Ghana's correctional institutions?"

By employing a qualitative case study approach, the study investigates the educational and rehabilitative potential of theatre, aiming to contribute to ongoing dialogues on arts-based activism and to offer practical recommendations for integrating theatre into correctional and civic education frameworks in Ghana. Ultimately, the study advocates for the transformative role of theatre in humanizing, empowering, and restoring dignity to marginalized populations within carceral environments.

Review of Related Literature – Applied Theatre and Human Rights Education

Applied theatre has evolved from representational forms to participatory frameworks that foreground the experiences and voices of marginalised groups. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed positions performance as an active confrontation of power, enabling participants to become "spectactors" rather than passive observers (Boal, 1979). Scholars note that such dialogic engagement aligns closely with the aims of human rights education, which emphasises critical consciousness and agency (Freire, 1970; Tilley, 2024).

Recent studies demonstrate the effectiveness of forum theatre in enhancing empathy and enabling collective problem-solving. For example, Dahal et al. (2022) show that community-based theatre in Nepal led to increased awareness and willingness to address social issues. These findings reinforce the value of embodied, participatory learning in contexts where formal human rights education is limited.

Applied Theatre in Carceral Contexts

Theatre work within prisons has gained attention globally as a rehabilitative and therapeutic intervention. Balfour (2004) argues that prison theatre challenges negative stereotypes while providing inmates with opportunities for expression and self-discovery. Davey et al. (2015) similarly assert that theatre fosters empathy and promotes critical reflection about justice systems.

Despite this growing body of international research, African prisons remain underrepresented in academic literature. Ghanaian applied theatre organisations such as Act for Change have utilised Boalian techniques to address issues such as modern slavery (Nakou et al., 2023), yet their work has not been extensively documented within scholarly discourse on incarceration.

Theoretical Foundations: Theatre as a Space for Rights Discourse

This study is grounded in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and performance theory (Schechner, 2002; Turner, 1982). Freire posits that education must be dialogic, participatory, and oriented toward liberation. In prisons, where agency is often suppressed, applied theatre creates spaces for participatory learning, enabling inmates to question power structures and reconstruct narratives of self and society. Performance is understood as a transformative cultural act through which identities, meanings, and social relations are enacted and renegotiated. Theatre then becomes a space where incarcerated individuals rehearse alternative ways of being and engage in collective meaningmaking. Together, these frameworks position applied theatre as a form of embodied inquiry and social justice praxis within carceral environments.

The relationship between theatre and human rights has matured from symbolic representation to active intervention through the field of applied theatre. Building on the pioneering work of Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed, as an applied theatre, positions performance as an arena for social justice, where audiences become “spect-actors” and co-contributors to change. This theatrical framing resonates deeply with human rights education, justice, and social inclusion. This is because it allows participants to perform and renegotiate ideas of justice, freedom, and agency through direct embodied engagement.

Scholars such as Tilley (2024) argue that applied theatre should be understood not only as art, but as transdisciplinary research and method in its own right. In this framing, theatre becomes a mode of knowledge production, enabling participants to articulate, rehearse, and resist human rights violations. As Hamilton, Cureton, and Christensen (2024) posit, applied theatre offers “a safe but critical space” for anti-oppressive social work, teaching participants to interrogate power relations rather than just reflect them.

Therefore, in the context of this study, Boal’s framing becomes the necessary vehicle for restorative dialogue. That is, participants (inmates, facilitators) and audience collaboratively explore questions of human dignity, justice, and reintegration. Since liberation emerges through dialogue participation as intimated by Boal (1979) and Friere (1970), it thus allows the applied theatrical forms to function as a critical pedagogy in action. The implication is that it replaces passivity dialogue, alienation with empathy and silence with collective voice. Consequently, with the power of theatre anchored on performance, storytelling, and bodily expression, the spirit of collectivism evokes and transforms cognitive processes into an experiential and affective learning experience.

The theatre of the Oppressed by Boal (1979) positions theatre as a radical space of learning where the human body becomes a site of knowledge and resistance. In effect, the inmates can rehearse (Tilley, 2024) new ways of being within and beyond the correctional facility. The framework as utilized thus enables a critical understanding of applied theatre as a form of cultural activism, rehabilitative education, and social justice praxis in the broader struggle for human rights and dignity.

From Representation to Participation

A major shift in recent scholarship is the movement away from theatre that merely depicts suffering toward theatre that involves those who suffer. Rather than outsiders telling the stories of marginalized groups, applied theatre emphasizes participatory processes. For example, the use of Forum Theatre in which community members enact real-life problems (e.g., gender violence, exclusion) and invite the audience to intervene, has been documented as particularly effective. In Nepal, Dahal, Joshi, and Swahnberg (2022) found that Forum Theatre interventions increased participant empathy, awareness, and willingness to negotiate change (Dahal et al., 2022). Here, applied theatre becomes a tool not only for raising awareness but for shifting narrative power and enabling communities to recount their own experiences in rights-based language.

In prison contexts and other underserved spaces, applied theatre has served as a mechanism for turning private grievances into public discourse. In such settings, participants may lack legal or civic literacy; applied theatre introduces a rights vocabulary through embodied, communal enactment. Although specific examples from Ghana or West Africa remain underrepresented, the global trend indicates the utility of this method in varied socio-political contexts.

Applied Theatre and Policy Influence

Applied theatre’s potential extends beyond changing individual attitudes; it can inform policy, advocacy, and systemic reform. One of the most evidently political forms is Legislative Theatre, an approach where enacted scenarios generate concrete proposals for policy discussion. Saeed et al. (2015) document how women in Afghanistan used theatre to address domestic violence and then engaged local legislators in dialogue. Theatre thus functions as a political process, not just a symbolic performance. When integrated with NGOs, social workers, and educational institutions, theatre can link grassroots experiences to formal policy debates (Hamilton et al., 2024). However, the literature stresses that impact remains limited unless interventions follow a pathway: performance → documentation → stakeholder engagement → advocacy. Without such linkage, theatre may remain symbolic rather than structural.

Ethics, Power, and Positionality in Applied Theatre

Ethical considerations feature prominently in the scholarship. Busby (2024) highlights that short-term theatre interventions risk replicating extractive dynamics—where researchers “use” community stories solely for academic output without long-term benefit to participants. Authentic applied theatre requires community ownership, long-term engagement, and transparent outcomes. Further, re-enacting trauma or injustice on

stage demands robust safeguards, including informed consent, psychological safety, and follow-up support. As Conrad (2023) emphasises in her work on ethics in applied theatre with street-involved youth, facilitators must be reflexive about their positionality and the power dynamics at play (Conrad, 2023).

Evaluating Impact: Can Theatre Change Reality?

The question of how to measure the impact of applied theatre remains contested. Many studies report positive self-reported outcomes—awareness, discussion, attitude shift—but fewer document long-term behavioural or structural change. The Nepal Forum Theatre study (Dahal et al., 2022) stands out for its mixed-method design, combining focus groups, interviews and survey data to show increased capacity for change. Yet even here, the authors caution that theatre’s impact is partially discursive—changing how people speak and think, which is harder to quantify. Wrentschur (2021) argues for mixed-method frameworks that combine ethnographic observation, reflective journals, and quantitative surveys to capture both attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. The literature recommends building participatory evaluation frameworks where communities define their success indicators.

Gaps in Literature and Emerging Directions

Despite the richness of scholarship, several gaps remain. First, there is relatively little applied theatre research on human rights discourse in West Africa, including Ghana—despite vibrant performance cultures and ongoing human rights concerns. Second, digital and hybrid theatre forms (e.g., online legislative theatre, virtual community performance) are under-explored, even as technology grows more central. Third, intersections of applied theatre with climate justice, environmental rights and migration remain under-theorised. Finally, scholars call for stronger theoretical bridges between human rights law, performance studies, and decolonial critique, to avoid framing theatre merely as empowerment without examining structural injustice (Tilley, 2024).

The literature reveals that applied theatre is far more than a mere educational tool; it is a participatory human rights practice. It transforms passive spectators into engaged participants; it converts individual suffering into collective rights-based discourse; and when properly designed, it links grassroots action to policy and advocacy. However, its effectiveness depends on ethics, long-term engagement, robust evaluation, and explicit linkages to power and policy. This paper underscores the potential of applied theatre in rethinking human rights discourse—not by speaking for the oppressed, but by enabling them to speak for themselves, rehearse their rights, and act upon them.

Conceptual Framework

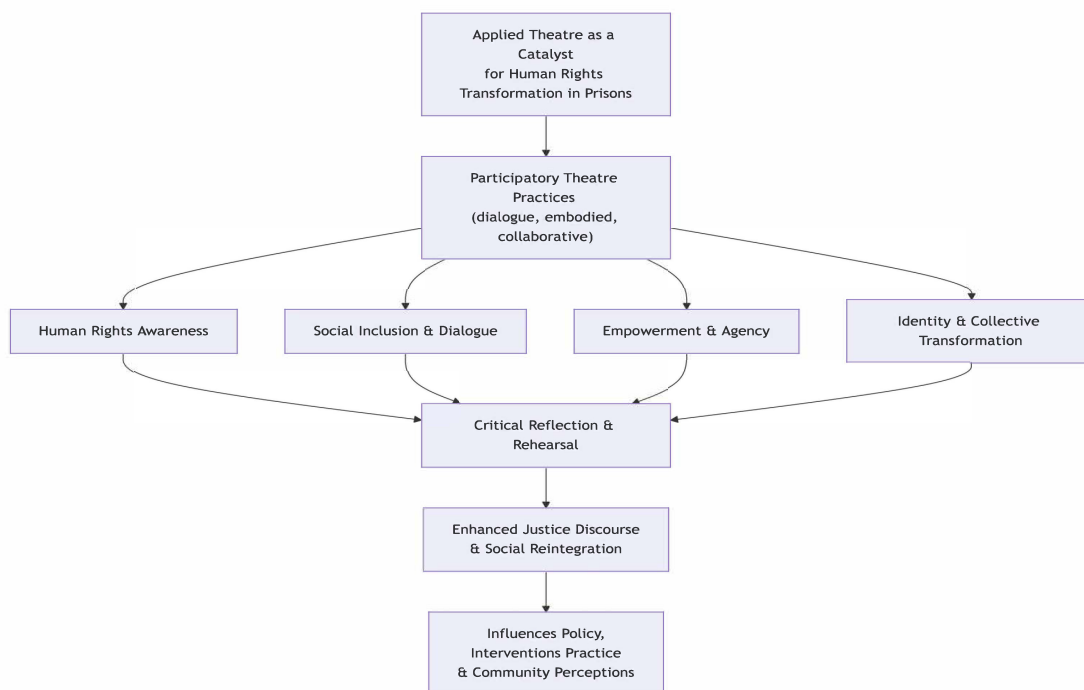


Figure 1: Theatre-Driven Human Rights Transformation Framework. (Authors’ construct)

This research, grounded in critical pedagogy and performance theory, presents a new conceptual framework to comprehend the transformational potential of applied theatre in Ghanaian prisons, based on the reviewed literature. The concept identifies participatory theatrical techniques, which include forum and community theatre as dynamic catalysts for transformation inside the carceral settings.

Figure 1 demonstrates that applied theatre interventions facilitate participatory engagement, hence promoting human rights awareness, social inclusion, empowerment, and identity transformation among incarcerated persons. At the core of this process is critical reflection and rehearsal, in which participants not only scrutinise their lived experience but also practice new roles and actions. This transforming process results in improved justice discourse and facilitates social integration. The concept emphasises a feedback loop, recognising that alterations within the jail environment can influence policy, practice, and broader community attitudes towards human rights and rehabilitation.

Research Methodology

A qualitative case study design was adopted to investigate applied theatre practices within selected prisons in Accra. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018; Creswell, 2018). The study also draws on performance ethnography, which recognises theatre as both a research site and a method of knowledge production (Bird, 2020).

Data Collection Methods

The study employed three primary methods which includes; documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

Documentary Analysis

A systematic review of pertinent documentary evidence was conducted to establish the contextual background and institutional framing of the theatre interventions. This included the analysis of programme reports, workshop facilitation guides, performance scripts, and existing institutional policies pertaining to recreational or rehabilitative activities (Bowen, 2009). This documentary corpus provided crucial insights into the stated objectives, pedagogical approaches, and historical evolution of the applied theatre programmes, offering a valuable counterpoint to the perspectives gathered through interviews and observations.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews served as a primary instrument for capturing individual narratives and subjective experiences. This flexible format allowed for a focused yet conversational exploration of participants' engagement with theatre, their understandings of human rights, and their perceptions of justice and injustice within the carceral context (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Separate interview protocols were developed for each participant group—incarcerated individuals, theatre facilitators, and prison staff—to elicit perspectives attuned to their specific roles and experiences (Robinson, 2023). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy for analysis.

Interviews were conducted with inmates, facilitators, and prison staff, focusing on experiences of theatre participation, human rights awareness, and perceptions of justice (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Robinson, 2023).

Participant Observation

The researchers observed theatre workshops and performances, documenting embodied interactions, participation dynamics, and thematic expressions (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Participants' observations were conducted during theatre workshops and performances to capture interactional dynamics, participation patterns, and emergent themes. The observations were done with the intent of capturing the very unusual behavioural prompts of the participants during the workshops, which are very salient to the study. In effect, this method provided direct access to the embodied, affective, and dialogic aspects of the interventions, offering insights not always accessible through interviews solely (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011).

Sampling and Site selection

Two correctional facilities in Accra, Ghana, were purposively selected based on their established applied theatre programmes and willingness to participate in the study. These sites were chosen to ensure that participants had direct experience with forum or community theatre interventions (Patton, 2015). Within these, participants were recruited purposively based on their involvement in forum or community theatre initiatives, ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences relevant to the research questions. The final sample comprised twenty (20) incarcerated participants, all males aged between 20 and 56 years, representing diverse

range of educational backgrounds, prior theater experience, and sentence lengths. This diversity was sought to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and interpretations of theatre interventions. It also had four (4) theater facilitators, three males and one female. They all have demonstrated expertise and experience in applied theatre and human rights education. Again, four (4) prison staff were involved in supporting theatre activities. Their perspectives provided essential contexts regarding the institutional view of the programme and the observed behavioural and social changes among the inmates' participants.

The composition of the incarcerated participants sample, comprising exclusively adult males, was not a deliberate sampling choice to limit the study's scope. Rather, it is an inherent outcome of the demographic reality of the selected research sites. The two correctional facilities purposively chosen for the study are designated exclusively for male inmates. As such, the population from which incarcerated participants could be recruited was, by definition, all-male.

Consequently, the sample reflects the gender composition of the institutions where established applied theatre programmes were accessible and willing to participate. While the researchers acknowledge that the inclusion of female perspectives would have enriched the study's findings, particularly concerning gendered experiences of justice and theatre's potential for empowerment, access to a comparable co-correctional or female-only facility with an analogous, well-established applied theatre programme was not feasible within the logistical and temporal constraints of this research. The study's primary objective was an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within its specific real-life context (Yin, 2018); therefore, the sample is congruent with the contextual realities of the chosen cases.

It must be noted that participants, varied with respect to educational attainment, prior exposure to theatre and length of incarceration. This provided a broad range of perspectives on theatre interventions.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Themes were refined through iterative coding and triangulated across interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents. Transcripts from interviews, observation notes, and documentary materials were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis facilitated the identification of key patterns and themes such as human rights awareness, justice/injustice, empowerment, social inclusion, and identity transformation. This was realized across multiple data sources. Coding was iterative, with themes refined through ongoing engagement with the data and cross-referenced with theoretical frameworks from critical pedagogy and performance theory (Freire, 1970; Boal, 1979; Schechner, 2002).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns remain central in applied theatre research, particularly within vulnerable populations such as incarcerated individuals. Scholars caution against extractive practices and emphasise the need for participant ownership, informed consent, and long-term engagement (Busby, 2024; Conrad, 2023). Evaluating theatre interventions also remains challenging, as behavioural change is often difficult to quantify (Wrentschur, 2021). Mixed-method approaches have been recommended to capture both attitudinal and experiential dimensions of impact. Ethical approval was obtained, and all participants provided informed consent.

Confidentiality, anonymity, and nonmaleficence were upheld, consistent with best practices for sensitive research (Liebling, 1999; Conrad, 2023). The research was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research in correctional settings. Institutional approval was obtained, and all participants gave informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout. Special attention was given to power dynamics, the potential for re-traumatization, and the vulnerability of incarcerated participants, following ethical guidance for fieldwork in sensitive contexts (Conrad, 2023; Liebling, 1999).

Analysis and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that applied theatre acts as a transformative pedagogical tool within Ghana's prison system. Consistent with Freirean critical pedagogy, theatre created dialogic learning spaces that fostered critical consciousness about rights, justice, and power. These results mirror global studies highlighting the rehabilitative potential of prison theatre (Balfour, 2004; Davey et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the study aligns with performance theory by showing that the enactment of alternative roles and scenarios enabled participants to rehearse new identities and social possibilities. Applied theatre thus contributed to emotional, cognitive, and relational rehabilitation. However, challenges remain, including persistent social hierarchies, stigma within inmate populations, and the need for sustained institutional support to ensure long-term impact.

The analysis and discussion section delineates the principal findings of the study based on the data obtained from documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation in the chosen prison theatre programmes in Accra, Ghana. The analysis, which is premised on the lenses of critical pedagogy and performance theory, examines the role of forum theatre and community theatre initiatives as transformative instruments for human rights education, justice, and social inclusion for incarcerated individuals.

Consequently, the results are organised thematically to emphasise patterns and insights that popped out during the research process. The themes are analysed in tandem with lived experiences of participants and the wider socio-cultural context of Ghana's correctional system. This discourse further illustrates that applied theatre practices foster critical dialogue and self-examination. It then challenges conventional notions of justice and incarceration with excerpts from interviews and field observations to enhance the depth and genuineness of the analysis.

This section concludes the analysis by situating these findings within the broader literature, illustrating the educational and rehabilitative potential of applied theatre with the intent of providing practical implications for policy, advocacy, and future research in prison-based human rights education.

Human rights awareness and understanding

The thematic analysis revealed that participation in forum and community theatre significantly enhanced inmates' awareness and understanding of human rights. Many inmates reported that theatre workshops represented their first meaningful engagement with concepts such as dignity, fairness, and rights. Theatre enabled abstract ideas to be explored through relatable scenarios.

One inmate stated:

"I didn't know people like me had rights. Now that I know, I deserve respect too."

Many participants described the theatre workshops as their first exposure to ideas of dignity, fairness and social justice. For instance, an inmate intimated that;

"I had no idea about the potency of theatre to make me aware that people like me had rights. Now, that I am aware, I deserve respect too just as the others who are free out there".

This finding corroborates Freirean critical pedagogy as the performative procedure create spaces for dialogic learning where abstract concepts of rights were explored through lived embodied experiences.

Experiences of Justice and Injustice

The study revealed that narratives from interviews frequently returned to experiences of injustice, both within and outside the prison system. The plays devised in the workshops often dramatized scenarios of wrongful arrest or abuse of authority. Participants frequently enacted scenes depicting abuse of power or wrongful arrest. Forum theatre allowed them to intervene, propose alternatives, and debate what justice should look like in practice.

These enactments facilitated critical reflection on lived experiences of injustice. This allowed participants to collectively process their experiences. However, observation notes detail moments where participants paused a scene to debate thoroughly possible alternatives, exemplifying Boal's forum theatre technique. For example, in the devised play, a "warden character slapped the inmate; others stepped in, saying, 'Let's try what should happen if the rules are followed.'"

Through these interventions, inmates critically examined structures of power and reflected on what justice could look like in practice.

Social Inclusion and Exclusion

Collaborative theatre creation fostered social cohesion. Participants expressed reduced feelings of isolation and increased emotional support. Facilitators noted that theatre created a space where inmates and staff "saw each other as people," promoting mutual respect. Theatre as communal activity has that potency of fostering a sense of inclusion within the prison community. Many participants described feeling isolated prior to joining the programme but reported greater social connection through collaborative creation. The reason is that theatre making breaks the airs around people and triggers social cohesion in ensuring that a task is achieved through the spirit of co-creation. On this social inclusion and exclusion facilitator intimated that;

"Those who act together start to see each other as people, not just as prisoners or staff. This is as a result of seeing each other as equal and having equal opportunity to create or share in the creation process."

However, barriers remained, particularly for those stigmatized due to the nature of their offences. The theatre space, while inclusive, also surfaced existing hierarchies and exclusions, suggesting the need for ongoing attention to group dynamics.

Empowerment and Voice

Participants described gaining confidence to articulate their stories and perspectives. Theatre provided a rare platform for expression within a restrictive environment.

“For once, I spoke and people listened. My story mattered.”

Another theme was the sense of empowerment experienced by participants. The opportunity to write, perform, and direct their own stories gave inmates a platform to express perspectives often unheard in mainstream discourse. As one participant stated,

"I am quite surprised that I could speak. And for once, I could speak out and people listened. Wow! My story mattered."

This empowerment is significant in light of performance theory, which views theatre as a rehearsal for social change (Boal, 1979). By expressing alternative roles and expectations, participants practiced agency and self-advocacy.

Transformation in Self-Perception and Collective Identity

Inmates reported shifts from self-stigma to self-acceptance. Group performance enabled them to recognise multiple identities beyond their offences—fathers, friends, creators, and storytellers. This observation was noted as participants in a group showcase this during social or communal learning in the development of the script for the performance. Therefore, a participant was again able to break away from self-stigma and shame and for once openly declared that:

“I’m not just here for my crime. I am also a father, a friend, someone who can make people laugh.”

These shifts indicate that applied theatre can contribute to the rehabilitation process by challenging dominant narratives about incarceration and enabling new forms of self-understanding.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that applied theatre—particularly forum and community theatre—holds significant potential for advancing human rights education, justice, and social inclusion within Ghana’s correctional institutions. By integrating principles of critical pedagogy and performance theory, theatre becomes a medium through which inmates can articulate their experiences, challenge oppressive structures, and cultivate new understandings of self and society.

The findings of this study offer important implications for policy and practice within Ghana’s correctional and civic education landscapes. To begin with, the demonstrated impact of applied theatre on inmates’ human rights awareness, self-expression, and social cohesion underscores the need for prison authorities and policymakers to formally integrate participatory arts-based approaches into the national correctional education framework. At present, rehabilitative programmes within Ghanaian prisons tend to privilege didactic, classroom-based models that limit opportunities for experiential and dialogic learning. The outcomes of this study suggest that theatre-based interventions can complement these existing programmes by enabling inmates to engage more critically and holistically with issues of justice, human dignity, and reintegration. Institutionalizing such initiatives—through policy directives, dedicated budgets, or public-private partnerships—would help ensure sustainability beyond occasional NGO-led activities.

Furthermore, the collaborative nature of applied theatre highlights the importance of cross-sector partnerships between correctional institutions, theatre practitioners, human rights educators, and social workers. The complexity of issues raised through performance, including abuse of authority, social exclusion, and psychological distress, indicates that theatre alone cannot address all rehabilitative needs. Instead, theatre should function as an entry point for broader multi-disciplinary interventions that link inmates to legal education, psychosocial support, literacy programmes, and post-release reintegration services. In this sense, applied theatre can serve as a powerful diagnostic and empowerment tool that informs case management processes and policy reforms.

Another crucial implication concerns the ethical and operational framework within which applied theatre is implemented. As scholars such as Conrad (2023) and Busby (2024) caution, arts-based work in sensitive environments demands rigorous ethical protocols to prevent retraumatization, exploitation, or unintentional harm. Policymakers should therefore develop guidelines that address facilitator training, informed consent, trauma-sensitive methodologies, and the long-term use of participant-generated material. This is particularly important in prison contexts, where power imbalances and emotional vulnerabilities are pronounced. Embedding ethical safeguards into institutional policy would support both practitioners and participants in maintaining a safe environment for reflective and transformative engagement.

Finally, the study reveals the necessity for systematic monitoring and evaluation frameworks that document the long-term outcomes of applied theatre programmes. Although participants reported significant emotional and cognitive shifts, there is a need for longitudinal research examining how these changes translate into behaviour, rehabilitation progress, and reintegration success. Policymakers and NGOs could strengthen programme legitimacy by adopting mixed-method evaluation tools and aligning outcomes with broader correctional indicators. In turn, such evidence can inform national dialogue on human rights education and contribute to reforms aimed at building a more humane, restorative, and socially responsive justice system.

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