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Cooperative learning as pedagogical praxis in Ghanaian theatre for development

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ABSTRACT

Theatre for Development (TfD) has emerged as a powerful pedagogical tool in African educational contexts, combining performance arts with community engagement to facilitate transformative learning experiences. This paper examines the intersection of cooperative learning principles and Theatre for Development methodologies through selected case studies from Ghana. Drawing on practitioner-led fieldwork from two community-based TfD interventions—Empowering Women to Reduce Child Trafficking in Senya Beraku (47 participants) and Promoting the Branding of Local Rice through Community Theatre Advocacy in Gomoa Okyereko (38 participants)—the study reframes TfD not merely as participatory performance but as a culturally grounded social learning system. Across both cases, learning emerged through shared inquiry, collaborative performance-making, reflective dialogue, and collective problem-solving, demonstrating that TfD functions most powerfully as an organized learning process rather than merely a tool for message delivery. The study also surfaces productive tensions: moments of resistance, uneven participation, and gender dynamics that complicate idealized accounts of cooperative harmony. The findings indicate that cooperative learning in Ghanaian TfD is culturally congruent with indigenous communal epistemologies, while acknowledging that those epistemologies themselves contain internal hierarchies that practitioners must critically navigate. This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on participatory pedagogies in African contexts and offers both theoretical implications and practical recommendations for enhancing cooperative learning outcomes in Theatre for Development initiatives.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, participation, Theatre for Development, pedagogical praxis, Ghana, applied theatre.

1. Background context

Theatre for Development (TfD) has become one of the most enduring applied theatre practices for community engagement in Ghana. While TfD literature foregrounds participation, it often under-theorizes the pedagogical processes through which participation leads to sustained change. Defined as

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a democratic platform where community members can meet and share ideas irrespective of educational background or social status, TfD employs indigenous languages and culturally relevant performance modes to facilitate social transformation. Simultaneously, cooperative learning has been widely recognized as a pedagogical practice that promotes socialization and learning across diverse educational settings, from pre-school through tertiary levels (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Slavin, 2013). This paper explores the intersection of these two powerful educational approaches through the lens of selected cases from Ghana, a nation with rich theatrical traditions and innovative educational experiments.

Ghana's theatrical landscape offers particularly fertile ground for examining the relationship between cooperative learning and TfD. The pioneering work of Efua Sutherland, who established the Children's Drama Development Project in 1967, sought to merge traditional instructional methods with formalized education within the Ghanaian educational sector (Adinku, 2024). This legacy continues through contemporary initiatives involving university-community partnerships, school-based drama programs, and development projects addressing issues ranging from education and health to environmental concerns. Ghanaian society is inherently communal, with knowledge transmission traditionally occurring through collective storytelling, apprenticeship, and shared ritual performance. These cultural practices resonate strongly with cooperative learning, which emphasizes interdependence, mutual responsibility, and shared meaning-making (Cole & Yankah, 2004). Despite this alignment, TfD scholarship in Ghana has tended to focus on outcomes such as awareness creation and behavioral change over the learning processes through which these outcomes emerge.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study draws on Johnson and Johnson's social interdependence theory, which posits that the way goals are structured determines how individuals interact, and the resulting interaction patterns produce particular outcomes (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000). Theatre for Development, with its emphasis on collective creation, shared problem-solving, and community ownership, appears to naturally embody many cooperative learning elements; yet the extent to which TfD initiatives in Ghana consciously leverage cooperative learning principles remains underexplored. This paper addresses that gap by examining TfD practice in Ghana through the lens of cooperative learning. It argues that cooperative learning constitutes the pedagogical core of TfD practice in Ghana, while also attending to the tensions, friction, and power dynamics that complicate any account of cooperative learning as seamlessly realized.

2. Problem statement

Theatre for Development (TfD) has become a prominent applied theatre practice in Ghana, widely employed to address social, economic, and cultural challenges through participatory performance. Existing scholarship consistently celebrates TfD for its emphasis on dialogue, community participation, and empowerment. However, much of this literature positions participation as an outcome rather than interrogating the pedagogical processes through which participation produces learning, action, and sustained community transformation. As a result, TfD is frequently discussed as a communication or sensitization tool, with limited analytical attention paid to how learning is structured, negotiated, and internalized within community theatre processes.

This gap is particularly problematic in the Ghanaian context, where communal modes of learning—rooted in shared responsibility, interdependence, and collective problem-solving—have long shaped social organization and knowledge transmission. While TfD practice in Ghana clearly reflects these cooperative learning dynamics, existing studies rarely conceptualize or theorize them explicitly. Consequently, the pedagogical foundations of TfD remain under-theorized, making it difficult to explain why some interventions lead to sustained community action while others result in short-term awareness without long-term impact. Without articulating how cooperative learning operates within TfD processes, practitioners lack conceptual tools for designing interventions that move beyond symbolic participation toward durable transformation. This study addresses this gap by examining Theatre for Development in Ghana through the lens of cooperative learning, positioning it as pedagogical praxis rather than merely a participatory performance strategy.

3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine Theatre for Development (TfD) practice in Ghana through the lens of cooperative learning, with the aim of repositioning TfD as pedagogical praxis rather than merely a participatory or communication-based intervention. Specifically, the study explores how cooperative learning principles such as shared responsibility, positive interdependence, peer learning, and collective reflection are embedded in the various stages of TfD practice, including community entry, problem identification, performance devising, and post-performance engagement. It moves beyond outcome-oriented analyses of TfD to interrogate the pedagogical structures that shape how communities learn, negotiate meaning, and formulate solutions to their own challenges—while remaining attentive to moments of friction, resistance, and uneven participation that qualify any idealized account of cooperative dynamics.

4. Objectives of the study

In response to the limited pedagogical analysis of Theatre for Development (TfD) practice in Ghana, this study seeks to foreground learning as a central process through which participatory theatre facilitates community engagement and social transformation. The study is informed by the following objectives:

i. To examine how cooperative learning principles are embedded in Theatre for Development practice in Ghana.

ii. To analyze the role of cooperative learning in enhancing participation, peer learning, and community ownership in TfD projects.

iii. To assess how cooperative learning within TfD contributes to sustained community transformation beyond performance events.

Research Questions

The following research questions serve as the primary analytical guide:

i. How are cooperative learning principles embedded in Theatre for Development practice in Ghana?

ii. In what ways does cooperative learning shape participation, peer learning, and community ownership in TfD projects?

iii. How does cooperative learning within Theatre for Development contribute to sustained community learning and transformation beyond performance events?

5. Theoretical underpinning

This study is theoretically grounded in an integrated framework that brings together cooperative learning theory, Freire's dialogical pedagogy, Boal's participatory theatre, and indigenous Ghanaian modes of communal knowledge production to conceptualize Theatre for Development (TfD) as pedagogical praxis rooted in collective learning. Cooperative learning theory, as articulated by Johnson and Johnson (1999), provides the pedagogical structure for understanding learning as a socially organized process characterized by positive interdependence, shared responsibility, peer interaction, and collective reflection. These principles resonate strongly with TfD practice, where community members collaboratively identify problems, co-create performance material, share responsibility for theatrical processes, and engage in post-performance dialogue that positions negotiated meaning over prescribed messages.

Freire's dialogical pedagogy further illuminates this process by framing learning as praxis—the dynamic relationship between reflection and action through which participants critically examine their lived realities and collectively work toward transformation (Freire, 1970). Within Ghanaian TfD contexts, this dialogical process is evident in the emergence of issues through community inquiry rather than external imposition, positioning participants as co-producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients. Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed extends this pedagogical orientation into embodied practice by reconceptualizing the audience as spect-actors who intervene, experiment, and rehearse social change through performance, thereby transforming theatre into a structured space for cooperative learning (Boal, 1979).

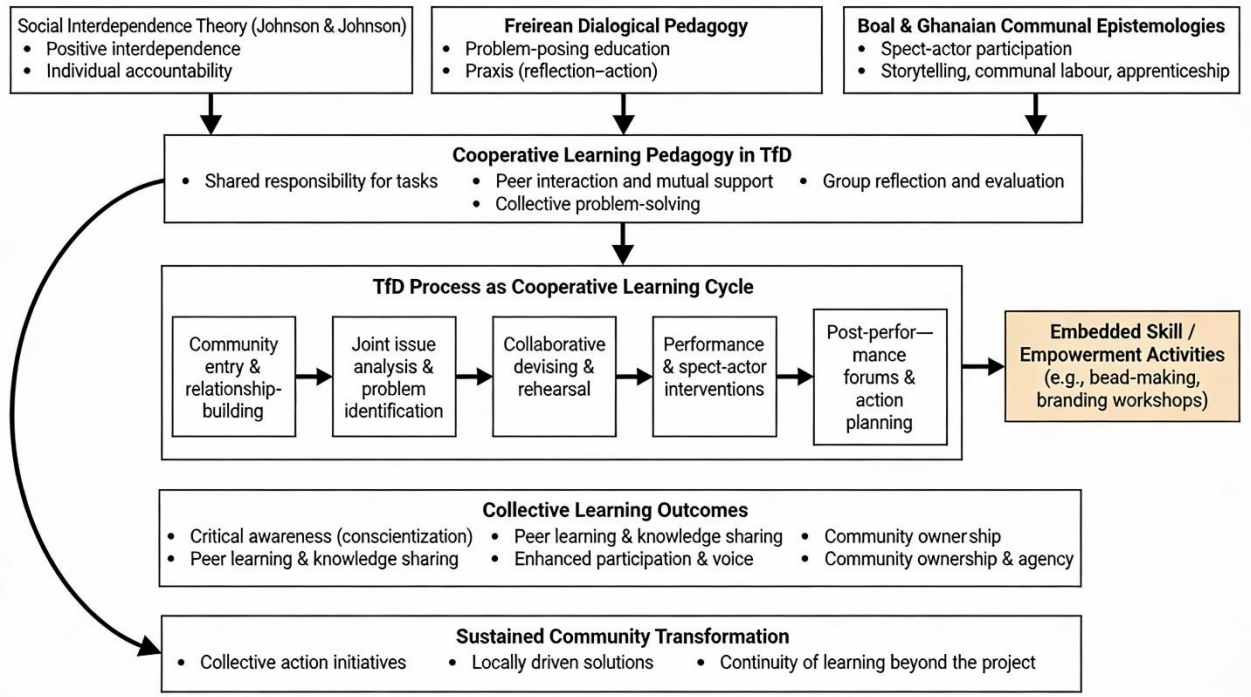
These pedagogical perspectives align closely with indigenous Ghanaian communal epistemologies that privilege interdependence, intergenerational learning, oral transmission,

apprenticeship, and collective deliberation as foundational modes of knowledge production (Akinyemi & Falola, 2021). Within this cultural context, TfD operates as a culturally congruent learning system in which cooperative learning is enacted through familiar social practices such as storytelling, communal labour, and public forums. However, it is important to resist the temptation to romanticize these communal epistemologies as inherently egalitarian. Ghanaian communal structures also contain internal hierarchies organized around age, gender, lineage, and chiefly authority that shape whose knowledge counts and who speaks with authority. As Yankah (1995) demonstrates in his analysis of Akan royal oratory, even the most participatory indigenous forums are mediated by structures of status and delegated speech. Cooperative learning within TfD must therefore actively negotiate—rather than naively inherit—these communal frameworks, remaining attentive to the power asymmetries that communal epistemologies both enable and sometimes reproduce.

Synthesized as a single framework, these perspectives position TfD as an intentional pedagogical system through which communities learn together, negotiate meaning, and sustain collective action beyond the moment of performance. By examining two TfD field cases from Ghana, this study explores how cooperative learning and TfD can be mutually reinforcing while acknowledging the tensions and complexities that arise in practice.

Conceptual Framework

To operationalize this integrated theoretical position and guide the analysis of Theatre for Development practice in Ghana, the study adopts a conceptual framework that visually maps the relationship between theory, pedagogy, practice, and outcomes. The framework positions social interdependence theory as the foundational lens informing cooperative learning principles, which in turn aligns with key Theatre for Development processes such as community entry, collective problem identification, collaborative performance-making, and post-performance dialogue. These processes



generate learning outcomes—enhanced participation, peer learning, and community ownership—that ultimately contribute to sustained community transformation beyond performance events.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework diagram for cooperative learning as pedagogical praxis in Ghanaian theatre for development.

6. Literature review

6.1 Theatre for development, participation discourse, and its limits

Theatre for Development (TfD) has occupied a central position within applied theatre practice in Africa and the Global South, emerging as a response to the limitations of top-down development communication and externally imposed social interventions. Early work by Kidd (1984) conceptualized

TfD as a participatory alternative to didactic theatre and modernization-driven development models, emphasizing dialogue, collective reflection, and community agency. In African contexts, TfD has been widely adopted because of its compatibility with indigenous performance traditions and communal forms of social engagement (Mda, 1993). Scholars argue that TfD's distinctiveness lies in its participatory methodologies, through which communities become co-creators of performance rather than passive recipients of messages (Plastow, 1998). In Ghana, TfD has been institutionalized through universities, cultural organizations, and non-governmental agencies since the 1980s, with practitioners consistently emphasizing participation as the defining ethical and political principle of the practice.

However, both Ghanaian and international scholars have raised critical concerns about the conceptual treatment of participation. Most influentially, Cooke and Kothari (2001) argue that participation has become a new orthodoxy—celebrated normatively as inherently empowering without sufficient interrogation of the power relations, group dynamics, and exclusions that structure who speaks and who remains silent within nominally participatory spaces. Within Ghanaian TfD literature, participation is frequently described in terms of audience involvement, improvisation, or forum discussions, yet the pedagogical mechanisms through which participation leads to learning, ownership, and sustained action are rarely theorized in depth. There is a tendency to treat participation as a singular, positive category without examining what participants actually come to know, understand, or be able to do differently. Furthermore, participation is often measured through attendance or activity levels during performances, with far less attention given to the cognitive, affective, and social processes through which durable transformation might occur. These limitations point to the need for a more explicitly pedagogical lens that can complement and deepen participation discourse by explaining how and why certain TfD processes generate sustained change. This study responds to that gap by shifting attention from participation as an outcome to learning as a structured, socially mediated process.

6.2 Cooperative learning theory

Cooperative learning theory offers a robust pedagogical framework for analyzing learning as a socially structured and relational process. Developed extensively by Johnson and Johnson (1999), the model posits that learning occurs not through individual competition or expert transmission but through collective problem-solving and negotiated meaning. They identified five core elements of effective cooperative learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive face-to-face interaction, the development of collaborative skills, and group processing or reflection. Positive interdependence means that group members perceive their goals as interwoven, such that they can succeed only if others also succeed. Individual accountability ensures that each participant is responsible for contributing to the collective task. Promotive interaction involves members encouraging and facilitating one another's efforts, while collaborative skills encompass communication, conflict resolution, leadership, and trust-building. Group processing refers to collective reflection on how well the group is working and how it might improve.

Meta-analytical studies consistently demonstrate that cooperative learning environments foster higher achievement, deeper conceptual understanding, improved interpersonal relationships, and stronger learner motivation compared to competitive or individualistic learning models (Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000). Cooperative learning functions as a social pedagogy that organizes how groups interact, make decisions, and reflect collectively on shared tasks—aligning with broader arguments in social pedagogy that education should cultivate social responsibility, democratic participation, and mutual care, particularly in contexts marked by inequality and exclusion.

In non-formal settings such as adult literacy groups, community health clubs, and farmers' associations, cooperative learning's relevance has been demonstrated through group projects, peer teaching, and collective problem-solving that redistribute knowledge away from external experts (Gillies, 2016). Within applied theatre and TfD specifically, many community devising ensembles and participatory forums already resemble cooperative learning structures, even if they are not named as such. Bringing cooperative learning theory into dialogue with TfD therefore provides a platform for analyzing how group processes are organized pedagogically and how they contribute to learning outcomes and sustained community action.

6.3 Theatre for development in Ghana: Historical development and contemporary practice

Theatre for Development has evolved as a distinctive practice that bridges arts and development, offering flexible space for experimentation and community engagement. TfD employs indigenous languages of the community under engagement, raising the level of inclusiveness among community members who often feel a sense of ownership of the development process (Asante & Yirenkyi, 2020; Prentki & Preston, 2009). Ghana's engagement with TfD has deep historical roots connected to indigenous performance traditions and the pioneering work of dramatists like Efua Sutherland. Traditional Ghanaian performances have been employed not only to enhance children's creative abilities but also to support the acquisition of societal values, morals, ethics, and virtues, helping young people become productive members of society (Adinku, 2024). Efua Sutherland's Children's Drama Development Project in 1967 was an attempt to merge traditional instructional approaches with formalized education within the Ghanaian educational sector. Beyond formal educational settings, TfD has been used to address community concerns across health, agriculture, gender, and child protection. These diverse applications demonstrate how TfD in Ghana operates across multiple sectors, each with distinct approaches to participation and learning outcomes.

6.4 Ghanaian communal epistemologies: Resources and tensions

While cooperative learning theory and dialogical pedagogy provide valuable analytical tools, TfD practice in Ghana must also be understood through indigenous communal epistemologies that predate and exceed formal educational theories. Ghanaian societies have historically relied on collective modes of knowledge production rooted in oral tradition, apprenticeship, intergenerational learning, and communal labour (Agyekum, 2006). Oral storytelling traditions such as Anansesem function as pedagogical spaces where moral reasoning, social norms, and problem-solving strategies are transmitted and debated collectively. Communal labour systems and apprenticeship models emphasize learning through participation, observation, and shared responsibility, while festivals and durbars provide public forums for collective reflection and decision-making.

However, the alignment between cooperative learning and Ghanaian communal epistemologies should not be idealized. Communal structures in Ghana are not inherently egalitarian; they are organized by hierarchies of age, gender, lineage, and political authority that shape who speaks, whose knowledge is validated, and who exercises leadership. Yankah's (1995) analysis of the okyeame—the court linguist in Akan political culture—demonstrates that even the most public and participatory communal forums are mediated by carefully managed structures of delegated authority. Similarly, gender roles within communal labor and festival contexts often assign women and youth to subordinate positions, limiting whose voice counts in communal deliberation. Recognizing these internal power asymmetries is not a rejection of indigenous epistemologies but a more honest engagement with them—one that avoids reproducing the romanticization that has sometimes characterized both development studies and applied theatre scholarship. By engaging communal epistemologies critically, this study argues that TfD must consciously negotiate the enabling and constraining dimensions of communal knowledge systems rather than treating them as transparently cooperative.

6.5 Intersections between cooperative learning and theatre for development: A productive tension

Despite the robust literature on both cooperative learning and Theatre for Development as separate areas of study, surprisingly little scholarship explicitly examines their intersection. Both pedagogies share fundamental commitments to participatory learning, social interaction, collective problem-solving, and the empowerment of learners. Both emphasize the importance of group processes, individual accountability within group contexts, and the development of social and interpersonal skills alongside content knowledge.

However, significant tensions also exist between them; tensions that are theoretically productive rather than merely problematic. Cooperative learning typically operates within formal educational settings with clearly defined learning objectives, assessment criteria, and institutional structures. TfD often functions in non-formal or informal contexts where goals may be more fluid, outcomes less measurable, and participation voluntary. Most significantly, cooperative learning is fundamentally a

structured, facilitator-designed pedagogy: its five elements are scaffolded by a teacher or trainer who pre-designs the conditions for cooperative interaction. TfD, by contrast, ideally emerges from community-identified needs and grassroots participation, with external facilitators serving as catalysts rather than designers. This creates a constitutive paradox: the moment a TfD facilitator deliberately structures positive interdependence or assigns accountability roles, they are exercising a form of pedagogical authority that sits in tension with TfD's commitment to organic, bottom-up emergence.

This tension is not resolved in this study; nor should it necessarily be. Rather, it is examined as an ongoing dynamic that practitioners must consciously navigate. The test of pedagogical integrity lies not in eliminating facilitation but in whether facilitation is applied transparently, negotiated collaboratively, and adapted continuously in response to community direction. Examining how cooperative learning principles can be consciously leveraged within TfD initiatives, while respecting TfD's distinctive characteristics, may offer insights for enhancing both pedagogies in community development contexts.

7. Research design and approach

The study employs a multiple case study design, focusing on two Theatre for Development projects co-facilitated and supervised by the researcher in selected Ghanaian communities. A case study approach is particularly appropriate for applied theatre research, as it allows for contextualized, process-oriented analysis of complex social practices. The design enables comparison across different community settings while maintaining sensitivity to local cultural, economic, and social dynamics. The research conceptualizes TfD as a processual learning system that unfolds over time, giving attention to the entire TfD cycle of community entry, problem identification, collaborative performance-making, and post-performance reflection rather than to performance outcomes alone.

7.1 Research sites and participant contexts

This study draws on two community-based Theatre for Development (TfD) projects implemented in the Central Region of Ghana. The selected sites are Senya Beraku (Awutu Senya West District) and Gomoa Okyereko (Gomoa East District), chosen purposively to enable comparative analysis of how cooperative learning operates across different TfD applications and community realities.

Senya Beraku is a coastal community whose economy is largely dependent on fishing and related informal livelihoods. The TfD intervention focused on addressing child trafficking through women's empowerment and livelihood support. A total of 47 direct participants were engaged across the project, including 24 women from community women's groups, 11 youth performers drawn from schools and vocational training centres, 8 community stakeholders (including chiefs, elders, teachers, and NGO representatives), and 4 members of the facilitation team who participated as both practitioners and reflective researchers. In contrast, Gomoa Okyereko is an agrarian community with a strong tradition of rice cultivation. The TfD project employed community theatre advocacy to promote the branding and consumption of locally produced rice. A total of 38 participants were directly involved, comprising 16 farmers, 10 market traders, 8 youth and students, and 4 community leaders including the local unit committee chairperson and traditional elders. Together, these two sites represent contrasting yet complementary contexts—coastal and agrarian, social protection and economic advocacy—through which the study examines the pedagogical dynamics of TfD practice.

7.2 Data generation methods

Data for the study were generated through a suite of qualitative methods designed to align with the participatory and dialogical ethos of applied theatre research. The researcher engaged in extended participant observation during community entry, rehearsals, performances, skill-training activities, and post-performance forums. Observation was complemented by detailed reflective practitioner field notes in which facilitation strategies, rehearsal negotiations, and community responses were documented, with particular attention to situations where principles of cooperative learning were visible—and equally to situations where cooperative dynamics stalled, were contested, or broke down.

Focus group discussions constituted a central data source. Three focus group discussions were conducted in Senya Beraku: one with the core women's group, one with youth performers, and one mixed stakeholder group involving community leaders and NGO representatives. Two focus group

discussions were held in Gomoa Okyereko: one with farmers and traders and one with youth and community leaders. All focus groups were facilitated in the local language (Fante) and subsequently transcribed and translated. Alongside group dialogues, the researcher conducted informal interviews and stakeholder conversations with teachers, traditional authorities, religious leaders, and local officials, offering broader contextual insight into how projects were situated within local development agendas. Post-performance forums followed each major performance, operating as collective reflection arenas in which audience members analyzed the issues raised, proposed solutions, and negotiated responsibilities. Together, these multiple methods enabled robust triangulation of data while remaining sensitive to the communal and participatory character of knowledge production within TfD contexts.

7.3 Researcher positionality

As a practitioner-researcher who both co-facilitated and subsequently analyzed these projects, the researcher occupies a dual role that requires explicit acknowledgment. Insider positionality affords depth of access, contextual fluency, and relational trust that would be difficult to achieve through external observation alone. However, it also creates a significant risk of confirmation bias; the researcher who designs a cooperative learning-informed TfD project is well-positioned to find cooperative learning in its operation. This risk has been managed through several reflexive strategies. Detailed field notes were maintained throughout both projects with an explicit instruction to document friction, failure, and ambiguity alongside moments of successful cooperation. The analytical process actively sought disconfirming evidence—instances where cooperative learning was incomplete, resisted, or distorted by power dynamics. Furthermore, the researcher discussed interpretations with co-facilitators and community contacts during the projects, using these conversations as informal checks on emerging analytical framings.

Despite these strategies, findings should be understood as practitioner reflections rather than independent ethnographic accounts. The researcher's investment in TfD as pedagogical praxis shapes what is foregrounded.

7.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical engagement followed culturally appropriate protocols. Community entry was negotiated through traditional authorities, elders, religious leaders, and relevant institutions before project implementation. Participation was voluntary, and the purposes of the project were communicated openly to community members. Given the collective nature of TfD practice, the study emphasizes communal consent and respectful representation. Individual names are anonymized where referenced, and analysis focuses on group processes rather than personal attribution. Ethical reflexivity was maintained throughout the research, particularly in relation to power dynamics between facilitators and community participants. The researcher was attentive to the risk that facilitation authority could suppress dissent, and reflective notes explicitly tracked moments where community members questioned facilitation decisions or withdrew from participation.

7.5 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis guided by an inductive-deductive approach. Initial open coding of field notes, focus group transcripts, and forum discussion data proceeded without predetermined categories, allowing themes to emerge from the data. These open codes were subsequently organized using Johnson and Johnson's (1999) five structural elements of cooperative learning—positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, collaborative social skills, and group processing—as analytical anchors for deductive verification. The resulting thematic structure was reviewed by a colleague with expertise in applied theatre research as an informal validity check.

The analysis focused on how learning was enacted through interaction, with particular attention to moments where participants corrected one another, built on shared ideas, or translated theatrical reflection into practical action. Crucially, the analysis also attended to moments of breakdown. For example, where participants disengaged, where hierarchical voices dominated group deliberation,

where cooperative structures were resisted or circumvented. These moments of friction are treated as analytically significant rather than as aberrations to be explained away.

8. Field data and case studies

8.1 Senya Beraku: Empowering women to reduce child trafficking

The Senya Beraku project emerged from extended community immersion involving collaboration with traditional authorities, schools, churches, mosques, social welfare officers, police personnel, and NGOs focusing on child protection. Rather than entering with a predetermined agenda, the facilitation team engaged in participatory reconnaissance, observing daily routines in the fishing community, visiting markets and landing beaches, and attending religious and social gatherings. Child trafficking surfaced as a shared community concern during group conversations, especially among women who described how economic hardship and limited livelihood options made families vulnerable to recruiters offering 'opportunities' for children elsewhere. Importantly, women framed the issue not primarily as parental irresponsibility but as a complex structural problem linked to seasonal fishing income, unemployment, and restricted access to alternative income-generating activities. Community entry thus operated as an early phase of cooperative learning where facilitators and community members jointly investigated the problem landscape and co-constructed an understanding of trafficking as a collective rather than individual failure.

Women's groups were central to shaping the project's direction. Through small-group discussions and storytelling sessions, women narrated experiences of children leaving for work in urban centres, coastal towns, and lake communities. These narratives were discussed, contested, and elaborated upon in group settings, with participants affirming or challenging each other's interpretations. The story creation process brought together schoolchildren, community adults, and vocational trainees in mixed-age groups. Facilitators encouraged participants to draw scenes from their own observations rather than imposing pre-written scripts. Responsibility for performance elements such as language, costume, music, and staging was distributed across the groups, requiring negotiation, compromise, and collective decision-making.

Analytical Friction: Resistance and Uneven Participation in Senya Beraku

The cooperative dynamics in Senya Beraku were not uniformly smooth. The bead-making training sessions, conceived as cooperative learning extensions of the TfD process, revealed significant skill asymmetries that generated frustration and disengagement among women who felt left behind by faster learners. In several sessions, women who struggled with basic threading techniques withdrew to the periphery of the group, reducing the horizontal peer-learning that cooperative structures are designed to enable. Facilitators had to consciously restructure groupings to pair experienced and inexperienced learners an intervention that improved engagement but also reasserted facilitation authority in tension with the community's own leadership preferences.

A second significant tension emerged around gender and the bead-making component itself. While the training was designed to empower women economically, it is worth interrogating whether assigning women to craft-based income generation rather than, for instance, advocacy or leadership roles inadvertently reproduced gendered divisions of labour rather than disrupting them. Several male community leaders expressed skepticism about the economic viability of bead-making as a serious livelihood alternative, suggesting that the framing of women's economic empowerment through craft did not challenge the structural gendered hierarchy within the community. This question was not fully resolved within the project and remains an important limitation of the Senya Beraku intervention.

A further dynamic that complicated cooperative ideals was the role of traditional male authority in the post-performance forum. While women's voices had been carefully cultivated through the devising process, the public forum space was partially reclaimed by chiefs and male opinion leaders whose interventions commanded disproportionate attention from the audience. Youth contributions were sometimes filtered through adult reframing. These observations confirm Cooke and Kothari's (2001) caution that participatory spaces do not automatically redistribute epistemic authority but they may simply relocate existing hierarchies into a new arena.

Notwithstanding these tensions, the culminating performance drew a large and diverse audience. The play intentionally ended with unresolved dilemmas concerning child migration, economic pressure, and community responsibility. The post-performance forum invited audience members to intervene with suggestions, critiques, and alternative strategies, echoing Boal's spect-actor model. Contributions built cumulatively, as participants referenced previous points, debated feasibility, and proposed concrete actions such as forming women's cooperatives, strengthening links with social welfare, and enhancing community monitoring of recruiters.

8.2 Gomoa Okyereko: Branding local rice through community theatre advocacy

The Gomoa Okyereko project addressed low market visibility and undervaluation of locally produced rice in a community where rice farming is a key livelihood. Preliminary engagement with farmers, traders, and consumers revealed that locally produced rice, despite its nutritional benefits and economic significance, was widely perceived as inferior to imported brands. Farmers often internalized this perception, regarding branding and packaging as external, capital-intensive procedures beyond their reach. The project therefore aimed to frame branding not as a purely technical marketing function but as a culturally meaningful process that could be collectively learned and appropriated.

Community entry began with participatory asset mapping that explored farming practices, marketing routines, cultural festivals (notably Akwambo), and indigenous food values. Elders shared historical narratives of rice cultivation, land use, and communal labour, while youth spoke about contemporary consumer trends. Through facilitated group discussions, participants began to recognize parallels between modern branding and existing cultural practices such as praise poetry, proverbs, naming ceremonies, and festival iconography, collaboratively reinterpreting branding as something already embedded in their cultural repertoire rather than as a foreign concept.

Analytical Friction: Resistance and Generational Tension in Gomoa Okyereko

The Gomoa Okyereko project encountered significant resistance during the devising phase that complicates a straightforwardly cooperative reading. A substantial group of older farmers expressed discomfort with theatrical modes of engagement, viewing dramatization of market interactions as trivializing or misrepresenting their economic struggles. During early rehearsals, several experienced farmers refused to participate in improvised scenes, arguing that 'playing market' did not address the structural realities of price fluctuation, storage infrastructure, and buyer networks that actually governed their livelihoods. This resistance represented a substantive critique of the TfD methodology itself rather than mere reluctance to perform, and it raised important questions about the boundaries of theatre as a pedagogical tool for economic advocacy.

The facilitation team responded by adjusting the devising process to foreground farmers' specific economic knowledge more explicitly, incorporating extended verbal sharing sessions before any theatrical embodiment was attempted. This adaptation improved engagement among older farmers but also lengthened the timeline and required sustained facilitation investment that may not be available in resource-constrained project contexts. Generational dynamics were also evident as in youth participants were more comfortable with theatrical experimentation, while elders tended to reclaim authority in post-devising reflection sessions, sometimes redirecting conversations from performance-based insights back to conventional development discourse about infrastructure and government support.

Devising the performance ultimately involved mixed groups of farmers, students, and market women dramatizing typical market interactions. As rehearsals progressed, participants used group reflection to propose alternatives—new packaging ideas, slogans emphasizing nutritional value, better display practices, and cooking demonstrations. The devising process functioned as a cooperative learning laboratory in which market concepts were explored, tested, and refined collectively. The final performance combined drama, poetry, dance, and live cooking demonstrations of local rice dishes. The post-performance forum brought farmers, traders, advertisers, and consumers into a shared conversation about how perceptions of local rice could be shifted. Farmers reported increased confidence in promoting their produce, noting that their sense of agency stemmed from having co-created the performance and the branding ideas it contained.

9. Discussion of findings

9.1 Research question 1: How are cooperative learning principles embedded in theatre for development practice in Ghana?

The two case studies demonstrate that cooperative learning is not a peripheral or incidental feature of Ghanaian TfD but a core pedagogical principle. In both Senya Beraku and Gomoa Okyereko, learning emerged through shared inquiry, collaborative performance-making, and reflective dialogue, confirming that TfD functions most effectively as a social learning system rather than a message-delivery mechanism. Positive interdependence was structurally embedded where facilitators depended on community members for local knowledge and authentic representation of issues, while community members depended on facilitators for facilitation skills and connections to advocacy networks. Within community theatre creation, participants needed each other's diverse experiences—farmers, victims, youth, elders, women—to construct a comprehensive theatrical exploration of issues.

Individual and group accountability was evident as community members were assigned specific roles reflecting their lived experiences. Each performer was accountable for bringing authenticity and depth to their role, while the group was jointly accountable for producing a performance that would advance critical community dialogue. Promotive interaction and social skills developed throughout the devising process as community members collaborated to create scenes, negotiate meanings, and craft dialogue. Community members did not simply attend performances or contribute episodic comments; they engaged in problem-posing, group analysis, and joint planning, assuming collective responsibility for both diagnosis and response.

9.2 Research question 2: In what ways does cooperative learning shape participation, peer learning, and community ownership?

Cooperative learning shaped participation, peer learning, and community ownership in TfD projects by turning groups into interdependent learning communities where responsibility, knowledge, and decision-making are shared. In Senya Beraku, women's groups, youth, and vocational trainees were drawn into shared tasks from the outset. Women did not simply respond to researchers' questions; they co-framed child trafficking as a structural issue linked to economic precarity. Similarly, in Gomoa Okyereko, farmers, traders, and youth jointly mapped community assets and co-selected local rice branding as the core issue, turning participation from mere attendance into structured co-ownership of the work.

Peer learning was especially visible in how knowledge and skills moved horizontally among community members. In Senya Beraku, women used bead-making sessions to teach each other techniques, discuss pricing and savings strategies, and relate these insights back to themes raised in the drama. In Gomoa Okyereko, farmers and traders collectively reconstructed the idea of 'branding' through dialogue, recognizing parallels with indigenous practices such as praise poetry and festival symbolism. Community ownership was evident across both sites as participants took up follow-up actions—women's cooperative formation in Senya Beraku, and sustained branding advocacy among rice farmers in Gomoa Okyereko—without continued facilitator presence.

9.3 Research question 3: How Does Cooperative Learning Within TfD Contribute to Sustained Transformation?

Cooperative learning contributed to sustained community learning and transformation by embedding knowledge and responsibility within community groups rather than in external facilitators. Post-performance forums operated as consciously created platforms where participants collectively analyzed the issues dramatized, evaluated proposed responses, and negotiated realistic next steps. Because these discussions were dialogical and group-based, they created habits of joint analysis that could continue in churches, markets, and association meetings after the formal TfD project ended. Cooperative learning also fostered practical capacities that enabled communities to act without constant facilitator presence. In Senya Beraku, bead-making groups became cooperative learning circles where women honed business skills linked directly to child protection. In Gomoa Okyereko, farmers gained confidence in articulating the value of their rice, having rehearsed branding messages and demonstrations together.

9.4 Power, voice, and uneven participation

A critically important dimension of the findings concerns who participated, on whose terms, and with what degree of epistemic authority. As Cooke and Kothari (2001) warn, participatory spaces do not automatically equalize power; they may simply relocate existing hierarchies into a new arena. The evidence from both case studies supports this caution. In Senya Beraku, despite the deliberate centering of women's voices during devising, the public forum was partially reclaimed by male chiefs and opinion leaders whose interventions commanded disproportionate audience attention. Youth voices especially, those of boys and girls were sometimes acknowledged only after adult reframing, reducing their participatory weight in the final deliberative stage.

The bead-making component also requires critical scrutiny from a gender perspective. While economically oriented toward women's empowerment, the assignment of women to craft-based livelihood activities risks reinforcing rather than disrupting gendered divisions of labor. The structural critique that economic empowerment for women in this context was channeled through activities already coded as feminine was not adequately addressed within the project and represents an important unresolved tension. In Gomoa Okyereko, elder farmers exercised authority in post-devising reflection that sometimes-redirected conversations from embodied theatrical insights back to conventional development frameworks, effectively reasserting expert knowledge over peer-generated learning. These findings suggest that cooperative learning within TfD does not automatically produce equitable participation; it requires active, ongoing facilitation of power relations—an intervention that itself carries authority.

9.5 The cooperative learning–TfD tension: Structured facilitation and organic emergence

The case studies illuminate a constitutive tension between cooperative learning as a structured pedagogical framework and TfD's ideal of bottom-up, community-driven emergence. Cooperative learning's five structural elements of positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, collaborative skills, and group processing are by definition pre-designed by a facilitator or educator. When a TfD practitioner deliberately structures these elements, they are exercising a form of pedagogical authority that sits in productive but unresolved tension with TfD's commitment to organic community leadership.

This tension was observable in both case studies. In Senya Beraku, the restructuring of bead-making groups to pair experienced and inexperienced learners was a cooperative learning intervention that improved skill transfer but reasserted facilitation control at a moment when the community's own peer hierarchies might have organized learning differently. In Gomoa Okyereko, the decision to introduce extended verbal sharing sessions before theatrical embodiment was a facilitation adaptation that resolved resistance but also delayed community-led theatrical devising. In both instances, the facilitator's structural authority was the mechanism through which cooperative learning was protected. This is a paradox that reveals the limits of TfD's idealized self-organization. Practitioners should be transparent about this paradox and design TfD processes that negotiate facilitation authority explicitly with communities, rather than presenting cooperative structures as naturally emerging from community action.

9.6 Mapping findings to the conceptual framework

To demonstrate the analytical operationalization of the conceptual framework, it is useful to map the key findings systematically onto its components. The framework positions social interdependence theory as the foundational lens: this is operationalized in both sites through the structuring of shared goals (addressing child trafficking; improving rice market perception) that created outcome interdependence binding participants together. The cooperative learning principles in the framework—positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, collaborative skills, and group processing—correspond directly to observed field moments: interdependence in the distribution of performance roles; accountability in individual performers' responsibility for authentic representation; promotive interaction in the bead-making peer mentoring in Senya Beraku and the branding co-devising in Gomoa Okyereko; collaborative skills in negotiation of language, costume, and staging; and group

processing in the post-performance forum deliberations. The TfD process stages in the framework; i.e. community entry, collective problem identification, collaborative performance-making, and post-performance dialogue map precisely onto the chronological case study narrative. The learning outcomes—enhanced participation, peer learning, and community ownership—are evidenced in the uptake of follow-up actions by women's groups and farmer associations beyond the project timeline. The framework's final element, sustained community transformation, is represented by the continuation of bead-making cooperatives and rice branding advocacy.

9.7 Theoretical implications: What cooperative learning explains that participation discourse cannot

The central theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating what cooperative learning, as an analytical framework, makes visible that participation discourse obscures. Participation discourse focuses primarily on presence, voice, and inclusion—whether community members are in the room, whether they speak, whether they are represented. These are important considerations, but they do not explain why some TfD projects produce sustained community action while others generate short-term engagement that dissipates after the performance. Cooperative learning theory shifts the analytical register from presence to structure in the sense that, it demands attention to how roles are distributed, how accountability is organized, how interaction is scaffolded, and how reflection is institutionalized.

This structural shift in analytical attention explains the sustainability differential. In Senya Beraku and Gomoa Okyereko, it was not the presence of community members at performances that generated ongoing action; it was the structural experience of shared responsibility, distributed ownership, and peer accountability developed through the cooperative learning processes of devising, bead-making, and forum deliberation. Participation-only accounts of TfD cannot explain this mechanism. Cooperative learning theory provides a conceptual vocabulary like positive interdependence, promotive interaction and group processing that enables practitioners and researchers to analyze, design, and evaluate TfD as a structured learning system rather than a spontaneous participatory event.

It is also important to acknowledge the limits of this theoretical transfer. Cooperative learning was developed and validated primarily in formal classroom settings with defined curricula, standardized groups, and institutional accountability structures. Applying its structural elements to the fluid, voluntary, and politically embedded contexts of community-based TfD requires epistemological flexibility and significant contextual adaptation. The elements of individual accountability and group processing, in particular, operate differently when there are no grades, no institutional sanctions, and no pre-existing group cohesion. Practitioners should treat cooperative learning theory as a heuristic resource for TfD design rather than as a prescriptive model to be mechanically implemented.

10. Conclusion

This study has examined Ghanaian Theatre for Development practice through the lens of cooperative learning, addressing a significant gap in TfD scholarship that has tended to celebrate participation without adequately theorizing pedagogy. Drawing on practitioner-led fieldwork from Senya Beraku and Gomoa Okyereko, the study has demonstrated that cooperative learning constitutes the pedagogical core of effective TfD practice. Across both case studies, community members engaged in shared inquiry, collaborative performance-making, and reflective dialogue, co-constructing knowledge and assuming responsibility for outcomes. Theatre functioned as a social learning laboratory in which communities rehearsed responses to complex social and economic challenges rather than simply receiving messages.

Crucially, however, the study has also surfaced the tensions, frictions, and power dynamics that any honest account of TfD must acknowledge. Cooperative learning was not uniformly realized; it was resisted by older farmers skeptical of theatrical modes, disrupted by skill asymmetries in bead-making, and complicated by the reassertion of male authority in public forums. The bead-making component, while economically oriented, may have reinforced gendered labor divisions rather than disrupting them. Indigenous communal epistemologies, while culturally resonant with cooperative learning's values, contain internal hierarchies that TfD must critically navigate. The very act of structuring cooperative learning within TfD involves a form of facilitation authority that sits in permanent tension with TfD's ideals

of community self-organization. Acknowledging these tensions strengthens rather than undermines the study's central argument that it constitutes genuine pedagogical praxis rather than spontaneous participatory harmony.

The findings suggest that TfD in Ghana is most powerful when it deliberately aligns cooperative learning principles with indigenous communal epistemologies while remaining critically attentive to those epistemologies' internal contradictions. By integrating cooperative learning theory with Freirean and Boalian pedagogies, the study re-centers indigenous knowledge systems within applied theatre discourse and positions Ghanaian TfD practice as a site of theoretical production for global debates on pedagogy, participation, and social transformation.

11. Recommendations

The study underscores the importance of designing TfD interventions explicitly as structured learning processes, not only as message-driven events. Facilitators should intentionally scaffold cooperative learning opportunities through shared responsibility, peer teaching, and group reflection, while integrating practical, skill-based initiatives as seen in the bead-making component in Senya Beraku to connect theatrical reflection with material transformation. However, they should do so with awareness of the gendered and hierarchical dimensions of such activities, and actively create mechanisms that redistribute power within the community dynamics.

Facilitators should also build in explicit processes for managing the CL-TfD tension. Transparency about the structured nature of cooperative learning design, negotiation of facilitation authority with communities at the outset, and willingness to adapt structures in response to community resistance must be judiciously navigated. The deliberate distribution of roles and responsibilities, the cultivation of peer support, and the creation of spaces for collective deliberation all contribute to a TfD pedagogy grounded in cooperative learning provided these structures are held lightly and adapted continuously. Finally, TfD practitioners and researchers should invest in more rigorous documentation of both success and failure within cooperative processes, building an evidence base that can inform future design and challenge confirmation bias in practitioner-led research.

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