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MAPPING THE BARRIERS TO DEAF THEATRE PRACTICE IN GHANA

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Abstract

Despite global advances in inclusive theatre, deaf individuals in Ghana remain largely excluded from the performing arts, a topic severely neglected in local scholarship. This qualitative study maps the barriers to deaf theatre in Cape Coast by engaging nineteen participants from the Cape Coast School for the Deaf and Blind, including students, staff, and hearing audience members. Grounded in the social model of disability and social inclusion theory, data from interviews and observations reveal five interconnected obstacles: financial constraints limiting resources and personnel; a lack of technical facilities and trained instructors proficient in deaf education and sign language; time pressures within school schedules; and deeply entrenched attitudinal barriers, where societal misconceptions frame deafness as an inability. Despite these challenges, the proactive formation of a student cultural troupe demonstrates resilience and a refusal to accept these barriers as fixed. This study makes significant contributions by addressing a critical gap in Ghanaian scholarship, which has prioritised education and health over cultural access. It provides the first empirically grounded analysis of its kind, operationalising the social model within the cultural realm and offering a diagnostic framework to guide intervention. The findings underscore an urgent need for dedicated funding, infrastructure investment, professional development, and advocacy to foster genuine inclusion.

Keywords: Deaf theatre, social inclusion, disability, barriers, inclusive theatre, deaf education

1. Introduction

The relationship between disability and theatre is ancient and complex, with portrayals historically reflecting and reinforcing societal prejudices. From ancient Greek dramatists like Aristophanes, who used physical impairments for humour and political commentary, to Shakespeare's Richard III, whose disability served as a metaphor for moral corruption, theatrical representations have often perpetuated damaging stereotypes (Nettleton, 2019; Lewis, 2006). These recurring tropes, the "tragic disabled," the "villainous disabled," and the disabled person as an object of ridicule, have significantly contributed to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of people with impairments, shaping public perceptions by suggesting that disability defines identity and limits life's potential (Kempe, 2012).

African and Ghanaian theatre, however, presents a complex picture of both challenging and reinforcing these prejudicial views. Playwrights such as Wole Soyinka and Athol Fugard have used disability metaphorically to critique societal decay and the intersections of race and impairment (Onuche & Adama, 2023). Within Ghana, dramatists including Yaw Asare and Esi Sutherland have granted agency to characters with disabilities, attempting to contest societal prejudices. Despite these efforts, negative portrayals persist and often mirror the deeply entrenched spiritual and traditional beliefs about disability in Ghanaian society (Babik & Gardner, 2021). Many ethnic groups view disability as divine punishment for familial transgressions or the result of malevolent rituals, beliefs so potent that they have endured despite the influence of Christianity and Islam (Andin, 2008; Avoke, 2002). These convictions lead to severe discrimination, stigmatisation, and even infanticide, with persons with disabilities frequently treated as subhuman, barred from social activities, and subjected to various forms of abuse (Aldersey, 2012; Kassah, 2012; Hervie, 2013).

These pervasive societal attitudes have created a stark exclusion of deaf individuals from Ghanaian cultural and theatrical life, despite a significant and growing deaf population estimated at over 211,000 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Minimal effort has been directed toward making theatrical productions accessible or gauging the appreciation of deaf audiences, effectively barring a substantial portion of the population from participating in a vital form of cultural expression. This exclusion stands in stark contrast to the global progress in disability integration within the arts, where movements toward authentic representation have gained momentum, influenced by the Disability Rights Movement and exemplified by inclusive companies like the UK's Graeae Theatre Company (Kuppers, 2013; Ross, 2006). While international best practices for accessibility measures such as sign language interpretation and inclusive casting are well-documented, Ghanaian scholarship has largely neglected theatre and the performing arts, focusing instead on education, healthcare, and sports.

This intellectual and practical gap underscores the urgent need for deliberate efforts to foster social inclusion within Ghanaian theatre. Social inclusion fundamentally requires adjusting the social environment to accommodate diverse abilities, fostering attitudes of acceptance and a willingness to reconsider personal perspectives (Allman, 2013; DESA, 2009). Deaf theatre, with its rich international history and use of visual storytelling, offers a powerful model for this transformation. It creates conditions for "reverse inclusion," prompting both hearing and deaf participants to reflect on their assumptions about deafness and diversity, thereby enriching theatrical engagement and fostering broader societal understanding (Bradbury, 2022). Without such initiatives, the creative potential of deaf Ghanaians will remain suppressed, and the nation's cultural expression will be impoverished. This study, therefore, addresses this critical

lacuna by investigating the specific challenges impeding deaf theatre in Ghana, seeking pathways to ensure deaf students receive adequate support and authentic representation within the country's cultural and artistic spaces.

2. Literature Review of Related Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Social Inclusion Theory, which provides a robust analytical lens for examining the barriers to deaf theatre in Cape Coast, Ghana. As conceptualised in contemporary disability studies, social inclusion is the process of creating conditions that enable all individuals to participate fully in economic, social, cultural, and political life (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [DESA], 2009). Crucially, the theory mandates adjusting the social environment to accommodate diverse abilities rather than requiring individuals to change, an orientation that aligns directly with the social model of disability (Oliver, 1993). It recognises that full citizenship encompasses the right to cultural participation and self-expression (Allman, 2013), making it particularly relevant for analysing access to theatrical spaces. Achieving such inclusion requires dominant groups to reconsider their assumptions about difference (Shemanov, 2014; Popova, 2013), a process that enables cultural exchange and mutual understanding without compromising personal or group identity (Araujo, 2022).

The theory's emphasis on cultural participation as a fundamental right directly addresses the study's core concern, as exclusion from theatrical activities constitutes a denial of rights explicitly recognised in Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). Furthermore, social inclusion theory's holistic perspective allows for an integrated analysis of how financial, technical, attitudinal, and other barriers interconnect and reinforce one another. This framework points toward comprehensive, multi-dimensional interventions that simultaneously address resource allocation, infrastructure, human capacity, and attitude transformation. Grounded in participatory principles, the theory also resonates with the study's methodological approach and its ultimate goal of developing a deaf theatre framework that emerges from and responds to the specific needs and aspirations of the Cape Coast deaf community.

2.2 Concept of Deafness

The concept of deafness encompasses a broad spectrum of hearing loss, ranging from mild to profound, with classification in Ghana based on a nominal hearing threshold of 0-25 decibels (Gadagbui, 2013). Individuals with a loss of 26-70 decibels are considered hard of hearing, typically able to manage in quiet conversational settings, while those with a loss of 71-90 decibels or above are deemed deaf, unable to hear sounds for ordinary purposes of life (Hardman et al., 2013; Hallahan et al., 2014). Sacks (2003) further refines this, distinguishing between the "hard of hearing," who benefit from aids; the "severely deaf," who lose hearing early but retain some speech perception with aids; and the "profoundly deaf," who cannot hear speech at all. Crucially, Sacks (2004) emphasises that the life stage at which deafness occurs is fundamental to identity: prelingually deaf individuals are born deaf or lose hearing before acquiring spoken language, relying on signed languages as their primary means of communication, whereas postlingually deaf individuals lose hearing after acquiring basic spoken language skills (Sacks, 2003).

The age of diagnosis and the communication environment of the home are critical determinants of a deaf child's linguistic and educational development. Early identification and instruction in communication significantly increase the likelihood of achieving strong literacy (Morrison & McDonald, 2010). However, in Africa, many deaf children are only diagnosed upon starting school, placing them at a significant disadvantage compared to their hearing peers (Aarons & Akach, 2002). Parental attitude is paramount; a Deaf child born to Deaf parents is likely to be immersed in Sign Language from birth, acquiring a considerable vocabulary by fifteen months, which subsequently facilitates learning to read, write, and acquire a second language like English (Lane, 1992; Marschark & Mayer, 1998). Conversely, deaf children born to hearing parents often lack this early linguistic foundation, as their deafness may go unrecognised until school age, by which point their language skills lag significantly behind (Marschark, 2001). This disparity contributes to a well-documented correlation between deafness and lower educational achievement, with individuals with hearing loss being three times more likely to experience reduced educational attainment (Emmett & Francis, 2015) and a significant decrease in cognitive ability (Lin et al., 2013).

These educational challenges are compounded by systemic and personal factors. Agyire-Tetty et al. (2017) attribute low achievement to institutional issues such as large class sizes, instructors' lack of sign language proficiency, limited materials, and inadequately tailored content, as well as personal factors including health problems, reading difficulties, and a preference for vocational training over academic pursuits. These obstacles are often rooted in broader societal perspectives on deafness, which can be understood through two contrasting models. The Medical Model perceives deafness as a deficiency or disability to be "fixed," for instance, through cochlear implants, a perspective largely rejected by the Deaf community as it frames them as "abnormal" rather than different (Bell et al., 2016). In contrast, the Social Model, embraced by many Deaf individuals, locates disablement not in the impairment itself but in societal barriers and the failure of the environment to accommodate difference (Oliver, 1993; Ram, 2010).

Barriers such as funding constraints and technical limitations arise from ignorance and biases within the hearing population, ultimately contributing to the disablement of Deaf individuals (Bell et al., 2016). Overcoming these challenges requires addressing societal attitudes and fostering greater awareness and understanding of the importance of inclusivity. The stage, however, offers a powerful counter-narrative. Theatre provides an inclusive platform that embraces and highlights the talents of individuals with disabilities, serving as a space where people of all abilities can express themselves and showcase their unique skills. By participating in and contributing to the performing arts, disabled individuals can actively break down barriers and challenge preconceived notions about their capabilities, embodying the principles of the Social Model by demonstrating that the environment, not the individual, can and should be adapted to foster genuine inclusion.

2.3 Deaf Theatre

The formal conceptualisation of deaf theatre emerged following the 1967 founding of the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) in the United States. Miles and Fant (1976) initially defined it as performances by Deaf actors using sign language to present material reflecting the life experiences of Deaf audiences. They deliberately distinguished this from what they termed "sign language theatre," a model associated with the NTD itself. In this approach, Deaf actors

performed classic works of spoken-language theatre translated into American Sign Language (ASL), with hearing actors simultaneously voicing the dialogue (Baldwin, 1993; Kochhar-Lindgren, 2002). This method, typically overseen by hearing directors, treated sign language primarily as an art form for visually representing pre-existing spoken texts. The accessibility of this format for Deaf audiences was contentious; the NTD's founding Artistic Director himself acknowledged that, while the theatre was ostensibly for the Deaf, it primarily benefited hearing audiences, suggesting it was not necessarily designed with Deaf viewers' needs at its core (Bragg & Bergman, 2002).

Despite these foundational concerns about its accessibility and purpose, the "sign language theatre" model became highly influential and was widely adopted internationally in the late twentieth century. Its impact can be seen in prominent companies such as the British Theatre of the Deaf (Stewart, 2015) and the Moscow Theatre Studio of Mimicry and Gesture (Kayiatos, 2010). These adaptations underscore the broad reach of the NTD's approach, even as the debate over its genuine inclusivity and its relationship to authentic Deaf cultural expression continued to evolve. The model's legacy is complex, demonstrating both the potential for cross-cultural theatrical exchange and the risks of marginalising Deaf perspectives in favour of appealing to hearing sensibilities.

For the purposes of this study, however, the term "deaf theatre" is understood through a more contemporary and inclusive lens. It refers to a theatrical form that actively embraces diversity, accessibility, and equal participation for all individuals, regardless of ability. In this model, Deaf and hearing performers share the same stage, fostering an environment of mutual respect and collaboration. This approach is characterised by its commitment to creating performances accessible to all audience members by integrating sign language, spoken language, captioning, and other forms of communication to bridge any gaps. By showcasing the talents of Deaf performers and highlighting the richness of Deaf culture and experiences, this form of theatre challenges traditional norms and expands the horizons of theatrical expression, aiming to create a more representative cultural landscape through the integration of diverse perspectives.

Theatre's inherent visual nature, with its reliance on expressive gestures, facial expressions, and body language, offers a particularly rich sensory experience for deaf individuals (Leigh, 2009). As Richardson (2017) affirms, theatre and the performing arts have long been recognised for their potential to transcend linguistic barriers and to include and involve deaf individuals. This potential is realised through practical accessibility measures, such as integrating captioning or subtitles, and through real-time technologies like open captioning or personal devices that provide synchronised text alongside spoken dialogue (Cho & Roger, 2010). Furthermore, the presence of trained sign language interpreters on or near the stage bridges the communication gap, conveying spoken dialogue, songs, and other auditory elements into sign language and ensuring deaf audience members can fully engage with the production, a practice recognised as a vital means of fostering inclusion (Pöchhacker, 2016).

2.4 Benefits of Deaf Theatre

Deaf theatre is a powerful catalyst for empowerment, a complex process that enhances personal, interpersonal, and collective power, enabling individuals and communities to actively address and improve their circumstances (Gutierrez, 1994; Ramon, 1999). This empowerment is deeply rooted in grassroots engagement and recognises the intersecting identities and experiences that shape power dynamics within communities (Hagquist & Starrin, 1997). The

outcomes of this process extend beyond merely gaining influence; they encompass heightened self-worth, self-esteem, personal agency, and an increased sense of control and autonomy for individuals within both their own community and society at large (Miley & DuBois, 1999; Staples, 1990). By providing a platform where Deaf individuals can showcase their unique perspectives, culture, and experiences, deaf theatre actively fosters this transformative empowerment.

Beyond its impact on Deaf participants, deaf theatre significantly influences the attitudes and beliefs of hearing audiences. Exposure to content featuring Deaf characters has a substantial and measurable effect; viewers are more inclined to donate resources and time to initiatives supporting the Deaf community, show greater openness to engaging with Deaf activists, and demonstrate increased awareness of the barriers Deaf creatives face in the entertainment sector (Gangwish, 2019). While correlation does not imply causation, and more cosmopolitan consumers may be predisposed to seek out diverse content, exposure itself prompts deeper engagement. A study by the National Deaf Centre on Postsecondary Outcomes (NDC, 2020) found that over a third of consumers who watched fictional portrayals of deafness were motivated to research sign language or the Deaf community, indicating that such representations can actively deepen knowledge and understanding.

The inherent aesthetic qualities of deaf theatre also enrich the storytelling experience for all audience members. Incorporating visual elements such as sign language, facial expressions, and body movements creates a powerful and multifaceted mode of communication (Weber, 2020). Actors rely on nuanced facial expressions to convey the emotional depth of their characters, serving as visual cues that clarify intentions and inner thoughts, thereby enriching the audience's connection to the story (Richardson, 2017). Similarly, intentional body movements contribute to spatial awareness and narrative clarity, using gestures, postures, and dynamic scenes to convey the flow of the story without relying solely on spoken words, thus creating a universally engaging theatrical language.

Fundamentally, deaf theatre embodies the principle of accessibility, which in inclusive arts discourse refers to designing environments and experiences to be usable by people with the widest possible range of abilities (Story et al., 1998; Iwarsson & Ståhl, 2003). True accessibility in theatre extends beyond physical access, such as wheelchair ramps, to encompass inclusivity for individuals across a spectrum of needs, including those who are deaf, blind, physically disabled, or on the autism spectrum (Austin, 2018). Ensuring auditory accessibility through accommodations like captioning and sign language interpretation is paramount. These services not only make performances accessible to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing but, in doing so, enrich the experience for a diverse audience, fostering a more inclusive and representative cultural landscape.

2.5 Challenges of Deaf Theatre

A primary and pervasive challenge confronting Deaf theatre is the acute difficulty of securing adequate and consistent funding. Substantial financial resources are required not only to initiate productions but also to sustain them through monitoring and evaluation, yet such support is often critically lacking (Black, 2020). These financial constraints have a cascading effect, limiting production budgets, curtailing outreach efforts, and reducing opportunities for professional development. Crucially, the lack of funds renders essential accessibility components—such as professional sign language interpreters, captioning services, and

specialised equipment—unaffordable, directly compromising the quality and inclusivity of performances (Kuppers, 2018). This financial instability ultimately threatens the long-term planning, growth, and very sustainability of Deaf theatre organisations.

Compounding financial hurdles are significant technical and infrastructural demands. Deaf theatre requires specialised facilities to ensure full accessibility, including captioning systems, sign language interpretation, and carefully designed visual cues that enhance storytelling for all audiences (Fryer & Cavallo, 2021). Captioning, for instance, provides a critical text display of dialogue and sound effects, while sign language interpreters translate spoken elements into visual language, both being essential for comprehension (McClarty, 2014; Gebron, 2000). However, the installation, maintenance, and expert operation of these technologies are costly and complex (Di Giovanni, 2018). Many Deaf theatre groups, lacking the necessary funding and technical expertise, are forced to rely on ineffective ad-hoc solutions that fail to meet audience needs (Black, 2020), underscoring the urgent need for targeted advocacy and increased support from government and the broader arts community.

The development and sustainability of Deaf theatre are further impeded by a scarcity of specialised training and the intense time pressures inherent in accessible production. In many areas, particularly those with smaller Deaf communities, trained instructors in Deaf theatre techniques are scarce, which severely hampers the cultivation of new talent and stifles creative innovation (Bailey et al., 2023). This shortage often forces experienced professionals to multitask across acting, directing, and technical roles, leading to burnout and compromised production quality (Fryer, 2016). Simultaneously, the additional elements required for accessibility, such as integrating sign language interpreters, creating precise captions, and perfecting visual effects, significantly extend rehearsal periods and production timelines (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2006; Berson, 2005). Balancing these intensive, labour-intensive processes with limited human and financial resources makes meeting deadlines exceptionally demanding (Pfeiffer et al., 2020).

Underpinning these practical obstacles are deeply entrenched attitudinal barriers rooted in negative stereotypes and misconceptions about deafness. Biases that frame deafness as a deficiency rather than a distinct cultural and linguistic identity lead mainstream audiences, funders, and industry stakeholders to underestimate the artistic potential of Deaf theatre, perceiving it as less engaging than traditional spoken-word performance (Leahy & Ferri, 2022; Leigh et al., 2020). This lack of understanding directly translates into reluctance from funders to invest, as they may undervalue non-verbal communication and overlook the rich narrative and emotional depth Deaf theatre offers (Crossick & Kaszniska, 2016). Overcoming these pervasive barriers necessitates sustained advocacy, education, and cultural sensitivity to highlight the unique contributions of Deaf artists and promote genuine inclusivity and equal opportunity within the broader arts industry (Theatre Communications Group, 2023).

3. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach, seeking to explore phenomena through participants' perspectives, enabling the researchers to grasp the subtleties of participants' opinions and uncover new insights into current situations (Ochieng, 2009). The study was conducted at the Cape Coast School for the Deaf and Blind. This school was selected because it serves a substantial number of deaf individuals relevant to the research objectives. Established on 9 November 1970, the school offers formal education to deaf children of school

age from Cape Coast, its surrounding areas, and other parts of the country. The school's vision centres on creating a world where children with hearing and vision impairments can access high-quality education and reach their full potential, while its mission focuses on providing education and support for these children. The sample comprised nineteen participants: nine deaf students, three visually impaired students, four hearing and sighted audience members, and three staff members. A purposive sampling technique was used. Two teaching staff members and one non-teaching staff member were selected using this method because they were directly involved in managing the institution's cultural troupe and had regular interactions with deaf students in both academic and extracurricular contexts. Data gathering activities included interviews, observations and evaluations of field events, and a thematic analysis technique was used to process the data. Ethical certification comprised an authorised letter of introduction informing participants about the study's aims and ensuring confidentiality. After approval was granted, the researchers completed all processes involved in selecting participants, after which consent forms were administered with the assistance of a sign language instructor serving as a field assistant. The anonymity of respondents was taken into account before conducting interviews.

4. Presentation of Results

The study revealed that the least experienced participant in working with deaf students had six years of experience. This did not affect the research in any way, since in terms of educational background, the participant had accumulated sufficient experience in working with deaf students, particularly in the domains of communication and teaching. The research findings also disclosed that the participant with the most extensive experience in working with deaf students had accumulated a wealth of expertise over a period of twenty-nine years (29). This participant's lengthy engagement with deaf students played a pivotal role in significantly influencing the course and outcomes of the research. The depth and breadth of the participant's experience emerged as a crucial factor that greatly contributed to the overall understanding and insights gained from the study.

To ensure the effectiveness of the theatre workshop, participants were asked about the various classifications of deafness present in the school environment. This inquiry aimed to provide the researchers with valuable insights and information that would prove instrumental in facilitating interactions with deaf students. In understanding the diverse categories of deafness prevalent in the school, the researchers sought to tailor the theatre workshop experience to accommodate the unique needs and preferences of the participating students, thereby fostering an inclusive and successful learning environment. This proactive approach reflected a commitment to enhancing the overall experience for both the researchers and the deaf students involved in the workshop. In response to the category of deafness in the school, one participant stated that:

In our school, we have mild, moderate, severe and profound in that order. With the profound, the person cannot hear anything. Some too have the mild. We have a girl in this school who has mild hearing loss. When she sits here, when you talk a bit, she is able to hear you. It is not that clear, though, but she can hear. For the profound, they cannot hear anything at all apart from vibrations (Participant HHH).

The discussion above affirms the assessment conducted by Gadagdui (2013) on the classifications of deafness. This evaluation of the various categories of deafness proved

instrumental for the researchers, serving as a valuable foundation for devising effective strategies for the structuring and coordination of theatre workshops tailored specifically for deaf students. The insights gained from Gadagdui's analysis informed the researchers' approach, aiding the thoughtful organisation and implementation of workshops that catered to the unique needs and preferences of the deaf students. Another participant made some astounding revelations about the categories of deafness, which really gave insight into this study:

There are levels to deafness; some of the deaf students who are engaged in traditional cultural dances cannot hear a word but are able to dance perfectly as a result of the vibrations of the drums. When the level of the drumming is very high, some deaf students complain that it is noisy. Others, too, do not hear anything at all. The school has an assessment centre. For the deaf students, once you are enrolled, your hearing level is tested by the doctor. This is done so that parents of the students know the category of deafness of their wards. Some are advised that hearing aids will be needed for their wards (Participant BBB).

The observation aligns with research by Aarons and Akach (2002), who asserted that many deaf children in Africa receive diagnoses only upon entering formal schooling, a circumstance that adversely affects literacy development and contributes to slower learning. Addressing these challenges requires collaboration among healthcare professionals, educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Efforts should focus on raising awareness of the importance of early screening for hearing impairments, implementing inclusive educational practices that accommodate diverse learning needs, and expanding access to specialised services such as sign language instruction and assistive technologies.

This revelation encouraged the researchers to utilise certain theatrical exercises in the workshop, which would cater for the unique needs of the participants, not only to enhance their literacy development but also to empower them to express themselves and connect with their peers.

The study also aimed to investigate the nature of performing arts activities at the school. The findings revealed that music and dance were the only performing arts activities offered:

Our biggest challenge was the Central region, where most dances are accompanied by songs, posing a difficulty for the deaf students who cannot sing. Additionally, we incorporate dances from French-speaking countries, particularly favouring the 'jembe' dance, and we can perform at least four variations of it. Our repertoire also includes 'Bambatakai' and 'Bambaya'. Typically, the blind students handle the drumming and singing, while the deaf students focus on dancing (Participant HHH).

Upon further inquiry, participants were asked why drama activities were not practised at the school. Five key themes emerged from their responses: financial constraints, lack of trained drama teachers, time constraints, technical limitations, and attitudinal barriers. These themes will be looked at and discussed in the following sections.

4.1 Financial Constraints

All participants in the study identified financial constraints as a major impediment to integrating hearing-impaired students into theatrical performances. One participant stated:

Drama involves the use of costumes, and every character needs one. Acquiring these costumes requires financial resources. For example, if someone is playing the role of a king, they will need the full regalia. If the performance involves a durbar, we need all the appropriate costumes to accurately represent it. Unfortunately, because of these financial issues, we have not been able to attempt a full-fledged drama production (Participant HHH).

These issues collectively underscore the significant barriers faced by the school in integrating drama into its curriculum for deaf students, pointing to the need for more robust funding, expertise, and institutional support. The next barrier in the study is the lack of technical facilities.

4.2 Lack of technical facilities

Lack of technical facilities, such as captioning devices, stage lights, visual cue devices, props, and costumes, sets, was identified by some participants as a significant obstacle to deaf theatre for the deaf students at the school. One participant expressed his thoughts on the issue as follows:

The necessary equipment for drama is expensive and beyond our financial reach. Without these essential elements, such as proper stage lighting, sound systems, and costumes, the quality and visual appeal of the performance suffer significantly (Participant HHH).

From another perspective, a participant emphasised that the lack of equipment and suitable rehearsal venues has been a major challenge affecting the school's performing arts activities, including those of the cultural group. This shortage significantly hampers the group's ability to practice and prepare adequately for performances. It also limits their creativity and inhibits the exploration of diverse theatrical techniques:

We lack the necessary equipment for our cultural group, and finding a suitable rehearsal space is often a challenge. As a result, we are forced to rehearse in the dining hall consistently. Dealing with deaf students also requires a sensitive approach, and having a designated rehearsal area would be beneficial for their needs and comfort (Participant MMM).

From the above data, lack of technical facilities plays a significant role as one of the major obstacles to Deaf theatre in CAPEDEAF/BLIND.

4.3 Lack of trained drama instructors

The theme emerged from participants' feedback, indicating that the lack of a professionally trained drama instructor makes it challenging to involve hearing-impaired students in theatrical productions:

We lack a trained instructor to lead drama activities for us. Attempting drama alone proved time-consuming as we needed interpreters to convey the story to the audience. As a result, we found that incorporating dance into our performances, known as dance-drama, was more feasible and effective than pure drama (Participant HHH).

Another participant highlighted another issue faced by the school, which is the absence of a professionally educated theatre teacher. They mentioned that while the students are eager to

participate in drama, the lack of an instructor who can teach and create plays for them poses a significant challenge:

While it's evident that students would appreciate and benefit from drama, the lack of someone to teach and write plays for us is a significant obstacle. Currently, Mr Hooper focuses on training deaf students in dance and blind students in drumming, leaving little room for drama. As a result, venturing into drama has been deemed difficult, and thus, we have not pursued it (Participant MMM).

Based on the data provided, it's evident that the school's inability to showcase hearing-impaired students in a dramatic performance is primarily due to the absence of a professionally trained drama instructor. The next significant barrier identified is time constraints.

4.4 Time constraints

Time constraints proved to be another barrier inhibiting the integration of hearing-impaired students in a theatrical production. A participant had this to say:

Putting deaf students on stage is time-consuming, as they generally process information more slowly due to their hearing loss. In drama, maintaining a fast and engaging sequence of actions is crucial. However, the pace at which deaf students process and respond can slow down the action, potentially affecting the flow and making the performance less dynamic and engaging (Participant HHH).

A participant noted that working with deaf students requires additional time. As a result, they are primarily assigned to dancing rather than playing drums in dancing:

Because the deaf students are very slow in grasping information, they are assigned dance roles and the blind students are assigned the drumming roles. This allows them to focus on mastering dance routines, which are more visually oriented and can be more easily adapted to their abilities. To engage deaf students in drum routines will be a whole day's work because they will keep forgetting drum patterns (Participant MMM).

Deaf students, who may need more time to process information and adapt to the fast-paced nature of drama, require more intensive and frequent practice sessions. It is therefore obvious that time limitations hinder their ability to fully engage in and benefit from theatrical activities, thereby preventing their successful integration into dramatic performances.

4.5 Attitudinal Barriers

According to some participants, attitudinal barriers significantly inhibit deaf students from participating in theatrical performances. One participant noted that the school has frequently faced marginalisation in terms of participating in performing arts activities, particularly in dance:

There have been numerous occasions where we were invited to perform, only to be informed just days before the event that our participation was no longer needed, with our spot given to able-bodied performers instead. As a result, we have decided to decline most future invitations. It's imperative that people cease treating us as inferior because of our disabilities, especially since we all take the same exams and achieve the same academic standards (Participant HHH).

Another participant had this to say:

I have travelled with some of my deaf students to France and Amsterdam for performances, where we were genuinely appreciated and recognised. The reception there was heartwarming and respectful. In stark contrast, here in Ghana, we are treated with significant contempt when we attend programmes (Participant MMM).

5. Discussions of Findings

Recent advances in deaf theatre, including sophisticated assistive technologies such as real-time captioning and improved stage acoustics, alongside growing recognition of sign language interpreters and deaf actors in mainstream productions, represent significant progress towards inclusivity. However, as indicated in chapter two, the field continues to face numerous obstacles that hinder the full integration and participation of deaf individuals in theatre. Scholars including Black (2020), Nijkamp and Cardol (2020), Fryer and Cavallo (2021), Bailey et al. (2023), Kochhar-Lindgren (2006), Pfeiffer et al. (2020), and Leigh et al. (2020) have identified various barriers to the advancement of deaf theatre. Similarly, participants in this study pinpointed five key obstacles hindering the integration of deaf students into dramatic theatrical performances: financial constraints, technical limitations, the absence of trained drama instructors, time constraints, and attitudinal barriers.

Financial constraints emerged as a major impediment to creating an inclusive theatre environment for hearing-impaired students, affecting everything from resource allocation to the quality of student engagement. Limited funding prevents schools and theatre companies from investing in essential resources, including sign language interpreters, assistive listening devices, and specialised training for drama instructors, thereby undermining the creation of an inclusive environment where all students can participate fully. These findings corroborate studies by Black (2020), Bamaturaki (2022), and Nijkamp and Cardol (2020), which collectively highlight how limited financial resources constrain production budgets, outreach efforts, and overall programme effectiveness. Black (2020) observes that financial limitations often result in smaller-scale productions that lack full accessibility, while Nijkamp and Cardol (2020) assert that arts organisations serving marginalised deaf communities face disproportionate financial challenges. Bamaturaki (2022) emphasises that inadequate funding creates barriers to providing essential training programmes and educational resources crucial for nurturing talent. Within the frameworks of social inclusion theory and the social model of disability, these financial limitations directly undermine principles of equitable participation by creating exclusive environments and contributing to societal barriers that disable hearing-impaired students.

Technical limitations were identified as a significant obstacle to achieving inclusive theatre for hearing-impaired students. Insufficient availability and integration of assistive technologies, such as real-time captioning systems and hearing loop systems, pose significant challenges for ensuring equal access to auditory information during performances. The shift towards digital platforms has introduced new accessibility challenges, as many platforms lack closed captions or sign language interpretation. Participants particularly highlighted that the lack of access to a properly equipped performance stage has significantly hindered deaf students' participation, with one participant noting that the school's dining hall serves as a makeshift performance stage, lacking the necessary infrastructure and acoustics. These findings align with Di Giovanni (2018), who emphasises that the absence of essential technical facilities significantly affects

the quality and inclusivity of deaf theatre performances. Burton (2009) affirms that the lack of accommodations such as real-time captioning can alienate audiences who rely on them to understand deaf theatre's unique aspects. Within the social model of disability, these technical limitations exemplify societal barriers, including a lack of captioning systems, inadequate hearing assistance devices, and inaccessible digital platforms, that impede access to inclusive theatre experiences.

The absence of trained drama instructors emerged as a major impediment to creating an inclusive theatre environment for deaf students. Qualified drama instructors are essential for adapting teaching and performance methods to meet diverse student needs, communicating effectively through sign language, and designing curricula that incorporate visual, tactile, and kinesthetic elements. Without these specialised professionals, instructors struggle to convey complex theatrical concepts, curricula remain inaccessible, and hearing-impaired students lack the supportive atmosphere needed to feel valued and confident. This finding is affirmed by Koppers (2018), Bailey et al. (2023), and Rafus-Brenning (2018). Rafus-Brenning (2018) suggests comprehensive professional development programmes to help existing professionals stay current with deaf theatre techniques, while Koppers (2018) emphasises targeted recruitment and training initiatives to increase the number of proficient instructors. Bailey et al. (2023) note that without access to specialised training, aspiring deaf actors and directors lack the necessary guidance to develop their craft, stifling creativity and innovation. Within the social model of disability, this shortage exemplifies systemic shortcomings in education and arts sectors that restrict hearing-impaired students' access to quality artistic opportunities, creating barriers not inherent to students' abilities but resulting from institutional failures.

Time constraints were identified as another significant barrier to including hearing-impaired students in theatrical performances. The limited time available to organise and execute productions poses considerable challenges, as integrating accessibility features such as sign language interpretation, captioning, and visual effects requires additional planning and rehearsal time. Without sufficient time, instructors struggle to ensure these modifications are effectively incorporated, potentially compromising inclusivity and performance quality. The study revealed that students currently meet only once weekly for two-hour dance rehearsals, which is insufficient time, particularly for hearing-impaired students requiring additional support. These findings confirm observations by Kochhar-Lindgren (2006), who notes that deaf theatre groups must integrate additional elements extending production timelines, complicating deadline management while maintaining quality. Berson (2005) affirms that achieving seamless coordination between actors and interpreters necessitates additional rehearsal time, straining limited schedules. Richardson (2017) notes that developing visual elements requires specialised knowledge and collaborative effort, further lengthening production processes. Within the social model of disability, time constraints exemplify societal barriers reflecting institutional lack of understanding and support for deaf individuals' needs, perpetuating exclusion and reinforcing disabling environments when schools fail to allocate sufficient time for necessary accommodations.

Attitudinal barriers were identified as critical impediments to integrating deaf students into theatrical performances, encompassing societal attitudes, biases, and misconceptions about deafness and deaf individuals' capabilities. These barriers manifest as stereotypes about deaf limitations, a lack of understanding of deaf culture, and resistance to the changes required for accommodation. Participants noted that performing arts instructors with negative attitudes may

inadvertently exclude or marginalise deaf students through actions such as not casting them in significant roles, overlooking their potential during auditions, or failing to provide necessary accommodations. This unintentional exclusion stems from a lack of awareness and understanding of deaf individuals' abilities and needs. These observations reaffirm Leigh et al. (2020), who note that negative stereotypes, misconceptions about deaf culture, and biases against non-verbal communication lead to limited support and recognition for deaf theatre, hindering growth and sustainability. This aligns with the assertion by Leahy and Ferri (2022) that biases against deafness result in an underestimation of deaf theatre's artistic and communicative potential. Addressing these barriers requires an approach that combines education, inclusive policies, the celebration of non-verbal communication, and the creation of dedicated platforms for deaf theatre, ensuring it receives the recognition and support needed to thrive and enrich the broader cultural landscape.

6. Conclusion

This study successfully mapped the terrain of deaf theatre practice in Cape Coast, Ghana, by systematically identifying five interconnected barriers—financial constraints, lack of technical facilities, absence of trained drama instructors, time constraints, and attitudinal barriers—that impede deaf students' participation in theatrical activities. Grounded in the social model of disability and social inclusion theory, the findings confirm that these obstacles are deeply rooted in societal structures and institutional shortcomings rather than individual impairments, with financial limitations preventing resource procurement, inadequate infrastructure creating inaccessible environments, human resource deficits hindering quality instruction, and time constraints reflecting institutional failures to accommodate inclusive practices. Most profoundly, attitudinal barriers revealed deep-seated cultural prejudices, including discrimination and spiritual interpretations of disability, yet participants demonstrated remarkable resilience through proactively forming a cultural troupe to challenge misconceptions, embodying the social model's principle of refusing to accept societal barriers as fixed. This study makes significant contributions to Ghanaian scholarship by addressing a conspicuous gap in disability research, which has largely neglected theatre in favour of education, healthcare, and sports, while providing the first empirically grounded, context-specific analysis of barriers to deaf theatre in a Ghanaian setting. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of qualitative, participatory research through in-depth interviews with sign language interpretation, while practically offering a diagnostic framework of five barrier categories for institutional self-assessment and intervention planning. The study creates essential groundwork for developing a contextually appropriate devising framework for deaf theatre in Ghana, pointing to the urgent need for dedicated funding streams, infrastructure investment, professional development programmes, structural schedule adjustments, and sustained advocacy to challenge attitudinal barriers, ultimately ensuring that deaf students receive not merely accommodation but genuine celebration within the nation's cultural and artistic spaces.

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